

**RESOLVING CONFUSIONS ABOUT THE AMO FRAMEWORK:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY INTO HRM IMPLEMENTATION BY LINE MANAGERS**

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to resolve confusions about the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework in connection to line managers' HRM implementation effectiveness. Although HRM scholars agree that line managers need ability, motivation and opportunities to perform well in the implementation of HRM practices, they disagree about the relationship among the AMO factors and how they influence line managers' HRM implementation effectiveness. By analyzing data obtained from 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with various HRM stakeholders (first-line and senior line managers, employees and HR managers) in a single organization in the life sciences industry, we aim to understand how the AMO factors interact and the content of the AMO dimensions to understand line managers' AMO factors necessary for effective HRM implementation. Our results show that we need a broader understanding of the AMO factors and different theoretical approaches to operationalize the ability, motivation and opportunities needed to effectively implement HRM practices.

Keywords: AMO framework, HRM implementation, line managers, HRM effectiveness

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HRM implementation is understood as the process leading towards the skillful, consistent, and committed use of HRM policies and practices by targeted organizational members (Bondarouk, Trullen and Valverde, 2009). Thus, the implementation of HRM policies and practices is understood as a necessary condition for overall HRM effectiveness (Chow, 2012; Khilji and Wang, 2006; Woodrow and Guest, 2014). No matter how well-designed HRM practices are and how well they fit the organizational internal and external contexts, they amount to little if they are not used or implemented well (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Gratton and Truss, 2003).

Although those responsible for the implementation of HRM may vary depending on the organization and the type of practice, line managers – supervisors at various hierarchical levels who have the responsibility for managing individual employees or teams - have been recognized as a crucial actor in the implementation of HRM in a variety of domains such as training and development, staffing, equal opportunity, health and safety, and performance appraisal among others (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). The role of these managers in the process of HRM implementation has been extensively researched (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Cunningham et al., 2004; Evans, 2016; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010; Kessler et al., 2016; Sikora and Ferris, 2014). Although different theoretical frameworks have been used for understanding the antecedents of line managers effective implementation of HRM practices, such as the social context theory (Sikora and Ferris, 2014), theory of planned behavior (McCarthy et al., 2010), social exchange theory (Alfes et al., 2013), or role theory (Currie and Procter, 2005), researchers have increasingly adopted the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework as the preferred conceptual approach (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Kellner et al., 2016; Sterling and Boxall, 2013; Trullen et al.,

2016). The underlying rationale is that line managers are more likely to effectively implement HRM when they have (1) ability, that is the necessary HR-related knowledge and skills, (2) motivation, this is they are willing to implement HRM practices, and (3) opportunity, that is their work context offers them the right support and avenues to implement HRM (Boxall and Purcell, 2003).

In the HRM discipline, the AMO framework has been widely accepted for explaining the HRM-performance relationship (Boselie, Dietz and Boon, 2005), because it explains that job performance is determined by a combination of employees' abilities, motivation and opportunities to perform well. These variables can be influenced by HRM policies and practices and specifically by high-performance work practices and systems (Boselie, 2010, Boxall and Purcell, 2003). Although the AMO framework is highly used and accepted, researchers also express some doubts about the relationship between the variables and their content. For example, Marin-Garcia and Tomas (2016) discuss some fundamental issues concerning the AMO framework, such as how it is tested and which approaches are used to shed light to the AMO factors. According to Kellner, Townsend, Wilkinson, Lawrence and Greenfield (2016), there is an ongoing debate about the nature of AMO interactions and their relationship with individual and organizational performance. The AMO factors may interact in a multiplicative model, in an additive model or in any combination of these two. Whereas Blumberg and Pringle (1982) and Vroom (1964) advocate the multiplicative model and hypothesize complementarity among AMO factors, others, such as Boxall and Purcell (2003) rather advocate an additive model, which would mean that each variable may have a direct and independent impact on performance. Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk and Looise (2013) have discussed the implications of using multiplicative and additive models of AMO factors

for HRM researchers and eventually applied a combined model by proposing that ability directly affects performance, while motivation and opportunity can only increase or decrease this effect.

While the AMO framework is highly applied to test the effect of high- performance work practices or systems on individual or organizational performance, by formulating ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing and opportunity-enhancing HRM systems (e.g. Jiang et al., 2012), and scholars often reached consensus on the kind of HRM practices needed to increase employees' ability, motivation and opportunity to perform well (Alfes et al., 2013; Bello-Pintado, 2015; Jiang et al., 2012; Jiang et al., 2017), less applications have been found for the line management performance in implementing HRM practices at the operational level. Those, who have used the AMO framework to understand the necessary performance indicators for line managers in the HRM implementation, have found contradicting results. For example, Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) found that line managers' ability had a direct effect on HRM implementation effectiveness while opportunity moderated this relationship (and motivation had no effect). In another more recent study, Kellner et al. (2016) found that the three factors could interact in more complex ways such that line managers' ability and motivation mutually influenced each other, and opportunity affected motivation. In addition, line managers motivation and opportunity could also directly affect HRM implementation effectiveness, when high levels of ability were present. In addition to the lack of consensus on how ability, motivation and opportunity might interact to affect line managers' HRM implementation effectiveness, there has been little understanding of the kind of ability, motivation and opportunity line managers need to implement HRM practices effectively. That is, researchers lack understanding about the content of the necessary AMO factors.

The purpose of this study is to further explore the AMO framework in connection to line managers' HRM implementation effectiveness focusing on 1) how the three factors interact and 2) the content of the AMO dimensions to understand line managers' AMO factors necessary for effective HRM implementation. We do so by analyzing data obtained from 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior and front line managers, as well as employees in a single organization in the life sciences industry.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review existing literature on the role of line managers in the effective implementation of HRM practices, paying particular attention to the AMO factors. We then describe the methodology that was used, and present our findings by paying attention to each AMO factor as well as to the relationships that can be established among them. We finish by discussing our findings in the light of previous work, as well as suggesting a more nuanced understanding of the AMO framework in the context of HRM implementation.

LINE MANAGERS' IMPLEMENTATION OF HRM AND THE AMO MODEL

HRM practices designed at the corporate level need to be implemented at the unit level before they are experienced by employees (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Makhecha et al., 2016; Piening et al., 2014). This means that the quality of line managers' implementation of HRM practices within their units becomes crucial for effective HRM (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Because of their proximity with employees, line managers are in a privileged position to translate HRM policies into their local units, raising employees' awareness about HRM practices and encouraging their use (Stirpe et al., 2013). Line managers may sometimes even cover for the shortcomings of HRM practices (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017). Their behaviors crucially shape employees' experiences of

HRM, which in turn impact on individual (Alfes et al., 2013; Gilbert et al., 2011) and unit or organizational outcomes (Den Hartog et al., 2013; Dysvik and Kuvaas 2012).

While line managers have sometimes been declared unprepared and lacking motivation for carrying out HRM work (Guest and King, 2004; Kulik & Bainbridge, 2006; McGovern et al., 1997; Woodrow and Guest, 2014), there is also evidence showing otherwise, that is, line managers who despite being highly motivated, lack proper support to implement HRM practices effectively (McConville, 2006; Renwick, 2003). Following the AMO framework, line managers' performance in implementing HRM depends on their ability, motivation, and opportunity to implement HRM practices effectively. In this section, we review the main findings in these three areas.

Line managers' ability to effectively implement HRM practices

There is extensive evidence that line managers HR-related knowledge and skills may significantly influence their HRM effectiveness (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Kellner, 2016; Kuvaas et al., 2014; Ryu and Kim, 2013). While abilities required may vary from practice to practice, HR competences may include knowledge about relevant legislation, trade union relationships, procedures on how to use practices, and people management skills (Nehles et al, 2006). Bos-Nehles et al (2013) surveyed 174 line managers and 1,065 of their direct subordinates in two organizations and found ability to be the best predictor of a line managers' HRM performance. In another field study with 89 line managers and 631 employees, Kuvaas et al. (2014) found that the perceived quality of the HR training received by line managers affected their perceptions of enabling HRM practices, which directly impacted employees' affective commitment and turnover intentions. Finally, Ryu and Kim (2013) showed that transferring HR knowledge to line managers could alleviate the

negative impact of line managers' HRM involvement on HRM effectiveness in emerging HRM systems. Line managers inconsistent use of HRM practices is often linked to the lack of the needed skills (Bolton, 2000; Bond and Wise, 2003; Cunningham et al., 2004; Jones and Saundry, 2012; Teague and Roche, 2012; Townsend, 2013). For example, Bond and Wise (2003) found that lack of consistency in the operation of work-life balance policies was the result of line managers' lack of understanding of statutory and company family leave policies. In a more recent study, Jones and Saundry (2012) found that line managers' poor handling of disciplinary procedures in their units was partly the result of a lack of ability on their part. Finally, Townsend (2013) has shown that the training and skills of line managers has a strong impact on their performance in workplace-level industrial relations issues.

Line managers' motivation to effectively implement HRM practices

Previous research has also indicated that an important antecedent of effective HRP implementation is the motivation line managers have to take on HRM responsibilities (Fenton O'Creeve, 2001; Harris, 2001; Kellner et al, 2016; Konrad et al., 1997; McCarthy et al., 2010). There is little consensus on the extent to which line managers are indeed motivated to carry out HRM tasks. Some authors argue that due to competing commitments, lack of time, or lack of interest, line managers' motivation to implement HRM practices is usually low (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995; Harris et al., 2002). This view is contradictory with that offered by other researchers (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013), who note that overall line managers take their HRM responsibilities seriously (Konrad, 1997; Fenton O'Creevy, 2001).

Differently from ability, there is disagreement around the extent to which line managers' motivation is or not crucial as regards HRM implementation. While Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) failed

to find a significant effect, Kellner et al. (2016) found that ward managers' motivation increased their HRM implementation performance for high levels of ability. Similarly, both McCarthy et al. (2010) and Harris (2001) show that line managers' perceptions of the instrumentality or usefulness of the HRM policy or practice being introduced shape line managers' attitudes towards it, which significantly impacts their HRM implementation effectiveness. In sum, there seems to be evidence pointing at the significant role of motivation, although it seems that in some contexts, high levels of line manager motivation across the board make this element less crucial in explaining variance in implementation behaviors (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013).

Line managers' opportunity to effectively implement HRM practices

Finally, no matter how able or motivated line managers are to carry out HRM work, they won't be able to do so if they are not offered the opportunity. Opportunity can be understood as the contextual enablers and constraints with a bearing on line managers' implementation performance (Trullen et al., 2016). Kellner et al. (2016) include in this category aspects such as time availability to perform HRM duties, HRM support, and clear HRM policies and procedures. These three aspects are also common in other studies (Nehles, 2006; Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). Both Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) and Kellner et al. (2016) find that line managers' opportunity moderates the impact of line managers' ability on HRM implementation performance. This means that when line managers lack opportunities to implement HRM, their performance is likely to be low even for high levels of ability. Lack of opportunities is often associated with experiences of role conflict (Currie and Procter, 2005; Evans, 2016; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010). For example, Hutchinson and Purcell (2010) showed in their study of ward managers in British hospitals how these managers had to combine new responsibilities on many fronts such as budget management but also HRM in

addition to their traditional clinical duties. “Huge people management responsibilities” with large spans of control and little support from senior management created high levels of role conflict and ambiguity for ward managers, as well as increasing work pressure and stress. Hence, the quality of HRM implementation significantly depends on contextual factors surrounding the work of line managers, and the extent to which these managers are adequately supported by senior management and the HRM department.

The nature of AMO interactions and their relationship with performance

The way in which the AMO factors influence line managers’ HRM implementation behaviors is open to debate in the existing literature. In a multiplicative model neither of the three factors can ensure performance on their own, while in an additive model they all have independent direct effects on performance, so that this can be improved by increasing any of the three. In the context of HRM implementation, Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) argued that motivation and opportunity by themselves cannot influence HRM performance without the proper HRM competences being in place. From their perspective, ability is the only necessary condition for performance, and motivation and opportunity would act as moderators of that relationship, alternatively strengthening or weakening the effect of ability on performance. As noted previously, the authors’ test of their model in two organizations gave support to the idea that only ability had a direct effect on HRM implementation performance, and that this effect was moderated by opportunity to carry out HRM work, but not by motivation. To explain their results, they further argued that high levels of motivation were common to all line managers in their study, which reduced the likelihood that variance in line managers’ HRM implementation effectiveness could be explained by motivation differences.

In a more recent qualitative study, Kessler et al. (2016) reached different results. While ability remains a necessary condition for effective HRM implementation, both opportunity and motivation act as moderators. They argue that in the context of their study, that of ward managers in hospitals, motivation cannot be taken for granted and may be seen as a key distinctive factor. The authors further argue that ability may also influence motivation and vice versa, which on occasion may result into a vicious circle of low ability and low motivation negatively affecting each other. Finally, these authors also found that when all elements of opportunity to perform HRM were low (time, HRM support, and clear policies), motivation was also negatively affected. Their study hence paints a more complex picture of how the different factors may relate to each other.

METHODOLOGY

Since there are some research insights about the relationship between the AMO factors and the effectiveness of line managers' HRM implementation, in this study, we need detailed insights from individual participants in order to investigate the HRM performance of line managers further. In-depth interviews are used to provide a deeper understanding of the perceptions about line managers' ability, motivation and opportunity to implement HRM practices. For these interviews, semi-structured interview questions are used, because the purpose of the interviews is to find out which concepts are important concerning their ability, motivation and opportunity to implement HRM practices. Questions are asked about what participants perceive as important factors for line managers' ability, motivation and opportunity to effectively implement HRM practices. Most of the interviews are conducted face-to-face. There is one interview which is conducted through the telephone because this employee works in the field.

The interviews were conducted in one single Dutch organization in the laboratory industry. The company under study provides customers with high quality laboratory and advisory services to contribute to global health and safety, focusing on chemistry and micro-biology of food. The organization under study grows with 30% per year, meaning that there were regular changes when it comes to HRM responsibilities and operational tasks. The organization aimed to be a decentralized non-bureaucratic fast moving group of entrepreneur-led businesses. The laboratories were settled in three locations throughout the Netherlands. Each location had one empowered and accountable managing director who sets the strategy for his or her business. He/she was supported by several line managers who were responsible for the operational output as well as for the performance of their team. They were empowered and needed to create or influence an environment in which employees perform, grow, contribute and enjoy. The HRM department was decentralized, which means that managers and direct supervisors were responsible for the implementation of HRM in the organization.

Management studies and organizational theory rely heavily upon case studies as a form of data collection. Single-case studies are best suited to consider how and why questions, while taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context within which it is situated (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Baxter and Jack (2008) argue that case studies are an excellent opportunity to gain insight into a case and to gather data from a variety of sources. This proves that a single-case study is the best suited research type to find out how line managers' ability, motivation and opportunity relate to their performance in implementing HRM effectively.

The population consists of multiple actors in the implementation of HRM practices. Since three business units are studied, our sample consisted of the managing directors of the business units (n=3), two line managers per business unit (n=6), two of their subordinated employees (n=

12) and the responsible HRM manager (n=1). To understand the interactions between different HRM actors in the HRM implementation process and to understand how other HRM implement cooperate and support line managers in their HRM role, we chose for a multi-actor approach. Further, to increase the reliability and objectivity of the collected data, different respondents are interviewed about the same concepts. For measuring the dependent variable (i.e. line manager's HRM implementation effectiveness), two employees per line manager and the managing director are asked about their perception about the line manager's performance in implementing HRM. As proposed in this research, HRM implementation effectiveness can be defined as the process of gaining employees' appropriate use of a certain HRM practice. Therefore, employees are asked about their satisfaction in regarding the way their line manager carried out HRM activities.

The interviews are voice recorded and thereafter transcribed. When the interviews were fully transcribed, they were imported and analyzed in Atlas ti. During the analysis of the transcribed interviews, the underlying concepts (codes) are found due to open coding. The open codes were developed on the basis of concepts participants appointed as important concerning their ability, motivation and opportunity for HRM implementation. The purpose of coding is to break down and understand the interviews and develop codes to better analyze the text.

FINDINGS

In this section we summarize the findings from our interviews in connection with the three AMO factors.

Ability

In analyzing the role that abilities played in HRM implementation, both HR-related and functional knowledge and skills were crucial to act as an effective team leader. HRM actors agree that knowledge and skills are essential to implement HRM practices effectively.

“Knowledge and skills are very important for the effectiveness of a manager. I think these factors are essential. It is important to have sufficient knowledge so that your team will take you seriously and they have the feeling that they can come to you to have questions.” (Employee, Location B)

“Knowledge and skills are a basic condition to perform well as a manager ... When you do not have enough knowledge, your success rate will be very low.” (Manager, Location A)

At the same time the current training package for HRM implementation is considered insufficient and thus participants complained about a lack of training on a variety of HR-related topics and emphasized the need for HR-related skills as a necessary condition to become a good manager:

“Line managers need more training. I notice that line managers at this location especially need more training in conversational skills ...”. (Managing Director, Location B)

“In this company it works as follows: You have to do it with the knowledge and skills you have when you come here. With that knowledge and skills you are successful or not. It is not that you come here and you get several trainings to become a good manager. No, it depends on the knowledge and skills you have when you come here. When you need help or something, you need to make that clear, otherwise you would not get any help”. (Manager, Location A)

However, perceptions about training courses and line management ability to implement HRM differed between business units. The organization clearly did not have a uniform policy about training programs and the way of providing training. Often, HRM training courses that were

offered in the organization were valued because they offered managers the opportunity to expand their professional networks and exchange experiences and lessons for carrying out HRM work. Managers especially liked the opportunity to network with colleagues from other business units and share “best practices” among line managers, because it gave them a chance to enhance their own learning process.

“I had a couple of trainings, like ‘Leadership Training’. Those kind of networking with people from the same functions are really good to exchange information. ... It was interesting to discuss topics like that and not just about business. ...It would be nice to have a network with for example other departments to know what their problems are and to have an exchange meeting so that we can learn from each other.” (Manager, Location B)

“...I join the so-called ‘best practice’ groups. We take over these ‘best practices’ from laboratories with similar customers and similar analyses. With other colleagues you go have a look at other laboratories abroad to see how they handle certain situations and what their challenges are. Thereafter you make a list of these ‘best practices’ and think about how these practices could work out for your location. Personally I think that this is a valuable opportunity to share information between different entities of the organization.” (Manager, Location A)

Interestingly, though, not all managers – and particularly more seasoned managers - agreed that more formal training was the best way to acquire HRM skills. Instead, these managers highlighted the role played by experience in helping them make a good diagnosis of HRM issues. This knowledge was difficult to embed in formal training, and was learnt on the job.

“I am a manager for 15 years now and I notice that now it is a lot easier. [...]As you grow older and when you get more experience, it becomes a lot easier. Now I learned to estimate how people

react. These are things I learned through experience and I do not know if you can learn that by training. I think that is just life experience.” (Manager, Location C)

“When you have a job interview with a candidate, you need to ask the right questions to find out whether this person is suitable for the job or not. This is something you learn from experience”.
(Manager, Location A)

Experience also helped more seasoned managers to recognize when they needed help from the HRM department, and hence to be more aware of the limits of their own HRM knowledge.

“As a manager you do not need to be an expert when it comes to HRM. It is important that you recognize a certain process so that you ask for support at the right time when you feel that you do not have enough knowledge about it. As a manager you need the managerial competences to recognize these processes”. *(Managing Director, Location C)*

Motivation

Motivation was a key factor for the effective implementation of HRM. Overall, respondents saw HRM responsibilities as a crucial aspect of the role as line manager, and seemed motivated and committed to do their best. Different HRM actors agreed that it should be line managers who are responsible for the implementation of HRM practices and for the development of their team. Line managers themselves were motivated to help people in their development process and being part of their development. They especially enjoyed the interaction with people in their team.

“As a line manager it is very important to like managing people. When you like your HR responsibilities (to manage people), you will express that motivation to your employees. A

manager needs to give employees the feeling that they are important and you cannot do that when you are not motivated yourself.” (Managing Director, Location B)

“I like my HR responsibilities. What I like the most is seeing development within my team ... I like giving employees the opportunity to develop themselves and being a part of that.” (Manager, Location A)

“The HR responsibilities are a part of my function. As a manager I have the most knowledge about my team.”. (Manager, Location C)

Managers were committed to employee development, even in the absence of institutional incentives. Even when solving daily problems in the operation of their units took most of their time, managers still performed their HRM work (e.g. preparing performance appraisal interviews), even if that meant extending their schedules or taking this work home. Thus, short-term pressing business issues could on occasion delay HRM activities, but never cancel them, as most line managers perceived the performance of HRM activities to be valuable for the business.

“Managers are particularly evaluated on the basis of pre-set goals such as efficiency of analysis and costs, and which things they have to improve.” (Managing Director, Location A)

“I think it is hard to indicate the difference between managing responsibilities and HR responsibilities. HR is always a part of your job as a manager. When you are not interested in people management, than you are not suitable for a management function in my opinion.” (Managing Director, Location C)

In talking about motivation, line managers and their superiors also talked about their autonomy in dealing with HRM issues. The fact that there were only few procedures and protocols

to carry HRM work and that they were free to manage their teams in the way they wanted (as long as business objectives were achieved) seemed to increase their motivation.

“I think it is important to have autonomy and do things the way I want. Within our organization this is possible. Of course there are rules that I have to keep, but there is room to do things the way I want and that is what is important for me”. (Manager, Location A)

“It is important to provide managers with the opportunity to play manager and not to take over their responsibilities. They need [...] trust. When you want a manager to do something for you then (1) you need to make that clear and (2) you need to let that manager take the decision because they have the power to decide. When you interfere as a managing director, you undermine the position of the manager and that is something you have to avoid.” (Managing Director, Location A)

When managers felt a lack of autonomy to take HRM decisions, this clearly seemed to demotivate them:

“My HR tasks and responsibilities would be nicer when it would be easier. Now I need to send an e-mail to the HR department when I want to look something up in a personnel file. They need to look that up for me, scan the documents and then send it to me by e-mail. When I have my own system where I can enter information about my team, it would be a lot easier.” (Manager, Location C)

The previous comment also illustrated line managers' dislike for what they often say as excessive bureaucracy. Following rigid rules although you think they are useless, are perceived as signs of a lack of independence. While line managers were committed to the development of their teams, they did not enjoy the nitty-gritty details of HRM administrative work. They complained

about carrying out tasks such as reporting absenteeism levels or managing employees' schedules. These tasks were commonly associated with time-consuming IT systems that added little strategic value.

“The administrative tasks I would like to assign to the HR department like the registration of employees who are sick. There are two systems where I have to register employees when they are sick in systems like ‘Timewize’ and ‘Verzuimsignaal’. As a manager you need to know how the systems work and how to register the sick employee into the systems and this costs a lot of time”.
(Manager, Location C)

Opportunity

In addition to ability and motivation, the interviews showed that managers also needed opportunities to implement HRM practices effectively. Overall they seemed unhappy with the support they received from the organization, especially regarding policies and procedures that indicate HRM tasks and responsibilities of managers to be able to effectively implement HRM practices at the operational level:

“I think the ability to implement HRM is very important but if you do not get the opportunity to do so then you can be very smart but you will not be able to implement HRM effectively ... When there are no clear procedures and policies than I do not know what exactly is expected of me.”
(Manager, Location B)

“The most important factor at this moment is the presence of clear procedures and policies, because these are not present yet ... At the moment we have very high expectations from the

managers but we do not provide them with the tools to live up to these expectations” (Managing Director, Location A)

“If we have clear procedures about how to do things, then we can take over tasks from each other because it is clear what to do and how to do. I feel at the moment that everybody has a lot to do. What we miss the most from the organization is a clear structure and procedures about how to handle.” (Manager, Location B)

As noted when talking about motivation, some managers also complained about HRM systems not being user-friendly:

“Systems like ‘Verzuimsignaal’ are worthless. This system is absolutely not user-friendly and it costs a lot of time to enter information in that system. I would like the HR department to take care of this. This is also the case with the system for the approval of the hours employees have worked [Timewize]. These basic systems should be user-friendly and unburden you as a manager and now they only cost extra time. I should spend this time on my team instead of figuring out how the system works.” (Manager, Location A)

“Within the company we have an intranet page, but this is more a kind of page with some documents on it. It is not user-friendly and the information on it is outdated. When I just worked here I was going through all these documents and started reading. But at a certain moment I thought: What am I supposed to do with this information?” (Manager, Location A)

Partly as a result of the perceived lack of support from the HRM department, line managers used to contact their managing director or other peer managers before they reached to the HRM department for help. The HRM department was mostly contacted for legal issues or information about specific regulations or systems.

“I support the managers when they ask for my help, so when they ask me about things they need my help for. Upon request I help them with a lot of things like how I would handle in certain situations.” (Managing Director, Location C)

“The collaboration between me and one of the managers is mainly coaching. The first questions regarding a lot of HR-related things first come to me, while basically they could also go to the HR department ... I would like that the line managers go directly to the HR department with these kind of questions so that I do not have to be in between. Mostly I do not have the knowledge about HR issues too, so then I still need to contact the HR department.” (Managing Director, Location B)

Finally, our interviewees also acknowledged that HRM-related work within their units was affected by larger contextual changes that occurred at the corporate level, but trickled down and impacted the work climate in the laboratory. In particular, the fact that the company was growing at very high rates but without a similar increase in hiring, increased pressure on current employees. This resulted in a negative climate in the laboratory, and made it more difficult for line managers to carry out their work.

“I think that my manager has too many tasks and that is the reason why it is hard for her. Besides I think that the organization can improve in caring about the well-being of employees and managers. We work in an organization that grows very fast but the amount of employees does not grow with the same amount. By giving the employees and managers a little more attention and to listen more to employees I think that the organization could achieve a lot more and people would get motivated to work harder.” (Employee, Location B)

Despite these changes at the corporate level, line managers were not always able to buffer their own units and create positive micro-climates for HRM implementation:

“The atmosphere in the laboratory is sometimes negative. Some employees are very negative about certain changes within the organization. There are a lot of changes implemented here at the laboratory and a lot of people find it difficult to adjust to that ... Because of these changes there is a lot of grumble and dissatisfaction with each other...” (Employee, Location A)

“My manager knows that the atmosphere is not always positive here in the laboratory. However, he keeps being positive. He motivates the team and stimulates employees to get the best out of themselves. I think that is good to see.” (Employee, Location A)

Interactions among AMO factors

Our interviews provided ample evidence that AMO factors were interconnected. For example, several quotes supported the idea that ability and motivation could influence each other, creating positive or negative cycles.

“Motivation and knowledge interact with each other. When you have the experience and knowledge to implement changes within an organization and you see that this is effective, you will get extra motivated. However, when it is the other way around and a manager does not have the experience and knowledge which results in that changes are poorly implemented, the manager will not get motivated. So a line manager’s ability and motivation are self-enhancing factors.” (Manager, Location A)

“When a manager is motivated, he or she will gain more knowledge because that person thinks it is interesting and wants to know more about it. When you like doing something, you are more easily prepared to learn new things and to get into that.” (Manager, Location C)

“I think that the line managers will like their HRM responsibilities more when they feel that they have enough competences to perform HRM activities well.” (Managing Director, Location B)

At the same time, all HRM actors agreed that line managers’ motivation and opportunity were interrelated, since motivation to implement HRM was affected by the work context (i.e. opportunity), including the level of perceived support, clarification of responsibilities, and user-friendly systems:

“Sometimes my manager needs to call and e-mail the HR department many times before things get done. At a certain moment you do not have the motivation to keep trying. When the manager is not provided with help and support from the HR department on time, there is no trust between the manager and the HR department. This results in that a manager will become less motivated to get things done.” (Employee, Location B)

“I would be more motivated to perform HR activities when I would have the proper tools to do so. [...]Therefore, I need a proper definition of who does what and thus for which things the HR department is responsible and for which things I am responsible so that I do not constantly need to ask”. (Manager, Location B)

“Managers would like their HR tasks more when their tasks would be made easier. [...] Now that they have certain HR responsibilities, they need to be provided with tools and resources to implement HRM. When they do not have the opportunity because they do not have enough time or there are no clear procedures, they will not be motivated.” (Managing Director, Location A)

“I motivate managers by giving them attention and acknowledge their problems. It is important to give managers the feeling that they are not alone and that upper management and the HR department are there to help them.” (HR-manager)

Besides having an effect on line managers' motivation, opportunity was also associated with line managers' ability to implement HRM. The following quote illustrates this:

“It would be nice if there were some more policies and procedures when it comes to HRM. Managers can use these policies when they do not know what or how to do certain things. Especially when I was new here it was hard because I did not know how to handle when an employee was sick for example.” (Manager, Location C)

Based on the results of our investigations regarding the interactions among AMO factors for HRM implementation effectiveness, we visualized the AMO interactions in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

DISCUSSION

This study focuses on line managers' ability, motivation, and opportunity to effectively implement HRM. Our findings are in line with those obtained by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) and Kellner et al. (2016) as regards the key role played by line managers' ability. At different organizational levels, organizational members recognized that HRM knowledge and skills were necessary to implement HRM, and some of them complained about the lack of HRM-related training. Interestingly, more experienced managers were less concerned with the need for formal training than less experienced ones. The former argued that HRM knowledge was hard to codify and could only be learnt from experience. While these opinions may certainly reflect managers' lack of awareness or lack of belief in HRM knowledge (Gill, forthcoming), they also suggest that some of the HRM skills needed to do a good job in implementing HRM practices may be tacit and difficult to communicate through formal training (Lenartowicz et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to acknowledge different

types of knowledge such as explicit vs. tacit or declarative vs. procedural when analyzing line managers' ability to implement HRM. This has implications not only for how to develop these skills (e.g. on-the-job training vs. off-the-job training) but also for how to select line managers.

Still in terms of ability, our findings also point at the relevance that a manager's social network plays in increasing his or her HRM knowledge. Social learning (Bandura, 1962) seems to take a central role in the way line managers acquire their knowledge. In fact, one of the most appreciated aspects of formal training was the fact that it allowed participants to share experiences and "best practices" and provided opportunities to expand their peer networks. As noticed by our interviewees and also in line with recent findings in previous literature (Op de Beeck et al., 2017), line managers often solved HRM problems by reaching out to their peers, and not necessarily to the HRM department. Hence, a line management network of contacts was as relevant as individual HRM skills. This suggests that it may be useful to start thinking of HRM ability not only as the set of HRM-related knowledge and skills attached to an individual, but also more broadly as including the knowledge and resources that are available to that person through his or her social network. While the first would reflect a line managers' human capital, the later would refer to his or her social capital, understood as "the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243). Thus, understanding ability more broadly - as socially embedded - provides a more accurate picture of line managers' HRM learning and individual resources to tackle HRM problems.

Our findings concerning line managers' motivation are in line with those of Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) in as much as the line managers we interviewed were intrinsically motivated to carry out their HRM responsibilities and took time from their busy schedules to implement HRM

practices. Also other HRM stakeholders considered line managers as motivated to perform HRM tasks and did not question the fact that it should be managers having HRM responsibilities to manage their team.

An additional finding concerning motivation relates to the role played by autonomy in line managers' implementation of HRM. While autonomy may have some costs when line managers' implementation of HRM significantly deviates from intended practices and may increase perceptions of inequity among employees (Hall and Torrington, 1999; Jones and Saundry, 2012), it can also allow line managers to shape and fine-tune HRM practices to better fit their local contexts, hence increasing their effectiveness (Bos-Nehles, Bondarouk and Labrenz, 2017). Managers perceived to value autonomy greatly, and seemed more motivated when they experienced leeway in taking decisions on how to manage their teams.

However, line managers' motivation to implement HRM seems to depend on their ability to implement HRM practices. When HRM training was absent, insufficient or disappointing or line managers perceived a lack of experience, their motivation was negatively affected. The fact that both line managers' HRM competences as well as perceived autonomy seem to interrelate with line managers' motivation in our study suggest that self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) may be a fruitful theoretical lens to further explore the role of line managers' motivation in HRM implementation. This theory posits that autonomous motivation, which is linked to individuals' need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, leads to improved performance vis-à-vis controlled motivation, which is the result of the presence or absence of external incentives. Our findings suggest indeed that aspects related to competence and autonomy have a significant impact on line managers' autonomous motivation, while institutional incentives may be less

relevant. These findings are also in line with those of other authors (Kellner et al., 2016; McGovern et al., 1997).

Despite the overall positive effect of autonomy on motivation, we also found some exceptions. In some cases (especially for less experienced managers), autonomy was perceived as a lack of clarity about their HRM responsibilities or lack of support. Hence, our findings also suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the role of individual differences in line managers' experience of AMO factors. Research on the effects of individual differences on employee perceptions of HRM practices (Guzzo and Noonan, 1994; Peccei et al., 2013) could be useful in further understanding their role in line managers' implementation of HRM.

Finally, this study also confirms the importance that the work context, that is, the opportunities given to line managers, has for the effective implementation of HRM. Indeed, several managers complained about aspects that prevented them from doing a better job, including lack of help and support, non-user friendly HRM systems that take too much of their time, and lack of clear policies and procedures. All these factors have also been found in previous research (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Nehles et al., 2006) and contrast with the view held by HRM professionals, who often make internal (person centered) rather than external attributions when explaining line managers' poor HRM performance (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). Our interviews support the idea that line managers oftentimes perceive a lack of a support from the organization.

Still in connection with opportunities offered to line managers, our findings also suggest that it is not only the specific actions that the HRM department or senior management may take to support the line, but the more general work climate of the overall organization that may affect line managers' HRM implementation efforts. Employees interviewed acknowledged that the increasing work pressure and organizational changes resulting from the firms' growth made line

managers' work in leading their teams more difficult. Thus, our findings support previous research that has shown how line managers' effective HRM implementation is partly dependent on larger contextual factors such as the overall organizational climate (Sikora and Ferris, 2014) or trust in senior management (Farndale and Kelliher, 2013). Furthermore, evidence from the interviews indicates that despite the larger context, line managers' leadership may be able to act as a buffer of external pressures on employees and improve the unit level climate.

The study also contributes to better understand how line managers' ability, motivation, and opportunity to implement HRM relate to each other. We found evidence that ability and motivation mutually influenced each other, either creating positive or negative cycles. A lack of perceived training and experience could lead to lower motivation to engage in HRM activities, but low motivation may also lead to the fact that line managers were less willing to invest in developing their ability. At the same time, our interviews also suggest that opportunity affects motivation. In line with Kellner et al. (2016), a variety of factors such as lack of clarity in HRM procedures, lack of support from the HRM department, or lack of user-friendliness in e-HRM systems could negatively affect line managers' motivation. While personal levels of autonomous motivation may be high, a variety of factors such as lack of proper support, excessive "red tape", or lack of clear procedures and responsibilities may end up eroding it. Finally, we also found some evidence that opportunity (e.g. the existence of HRM manuals or procedures) affected line managers' learning of HRM work and thus their ability. The end result was that despite high levels of personal motivation, not all line managers were equally motivated due to both opportunity and ability-related factors.

These findings are similar to those obtained by Kellner et al. (2016) in their study on hospital ward managers, although these authors did not explore the effect of opportunity on ability.

In terms of the relationships of line managers' AMO factors with implementation performance and also in line with these authors, our interview data suggests that line managers' ability is a necessary condition for effective HRM implementation, but that even when ability is high, lack of opportunity or motivation may negatively impact HRM implementation.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has some limitations that should be taken into account in interpreting the results. First, it was difficult during the interviews to separate line managers' explanations on how they led their teams from the implementation of HRM practices. This was partly due to the fact that we asked about their HRM work in general, but did not focus on the implementation of a specific HRM practice. However, according to Purcell and Hutchinson (2007), leadership behavior and HRM are strongly related and mutually dependent, and thus line managers use them interchangeably to manage their teams.

Another important limitation was that we did not collect data that allowed us to assess line managers' HRM implementation effectiveness independently of the AMO factors. Hence, while our interviews mentioned those factors that helped them carry out their HRM work effectively, we could not empirically test whether those factors were associated with actual gains in HRM implementation effectiveness. Future research could address both of these limitations by studying line managers' AMO factors in connection with the implementation of one or more specific HRM practices (Trullen et al., 2016) and obtaining employee assessments of HRM implementation effectiveness (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013).

Another limitation of this study was that the researchers directly asked respondents to talk about the different AMO factors and their relationships. Such an approach may occasionally result

in interviewees answering questions in ways they think the interviewer wants them answered, hence affecting the validity of the results. However, since we validated answers from one group of respondents with answers of other HRM stakeholder, the validity of the results was guaranteed. Finally, because we focused on a single organization in a very specific industry (i.e. life sciences), our results lack generalizability. However, the fact that most of our results are in line with recent research on this same topic (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Kellner et al., 2016) increases our confidence in the results.

CONCLUSION

Building on the work of Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) and Kellner et al. (2016), the present study improves our understanding of the AMO model in connection to the effective implementation of HRM by line managers. Our findings show that ability and motivation mutually influence each other, and that line managers' motivation is in turn also affected by existent opportunities in their work contexts. While we find line managers' personal motivation to be high (in line with Bos-Nehles et al., 2013), we also realize that several factors can erode it, which, in line with Kellner et al. (2016), means that motivation continues to be a key factor in explaining HRM implementation effectiveness.

Our study also extends the understanding of the AMO factors by distinguishing between different dimensions of ability and motivation. We show that tacit dimensions of HRM knowledge may be as relevant as explicit ones, and that line managers' ability to implement HRM also needs to be understood in terms of line managers' social capital. In addition, we suggest that self-determination theory (with its distinction between autonomous and controlled motivation and its

antecedents) may be a good conceptual lense to further understand contradictory findings in previous research as regards line management motivation, as well as to provide a good rationale for why both ability and opportunity may influence motivation. Further work will be needed to systematically test these new findings.

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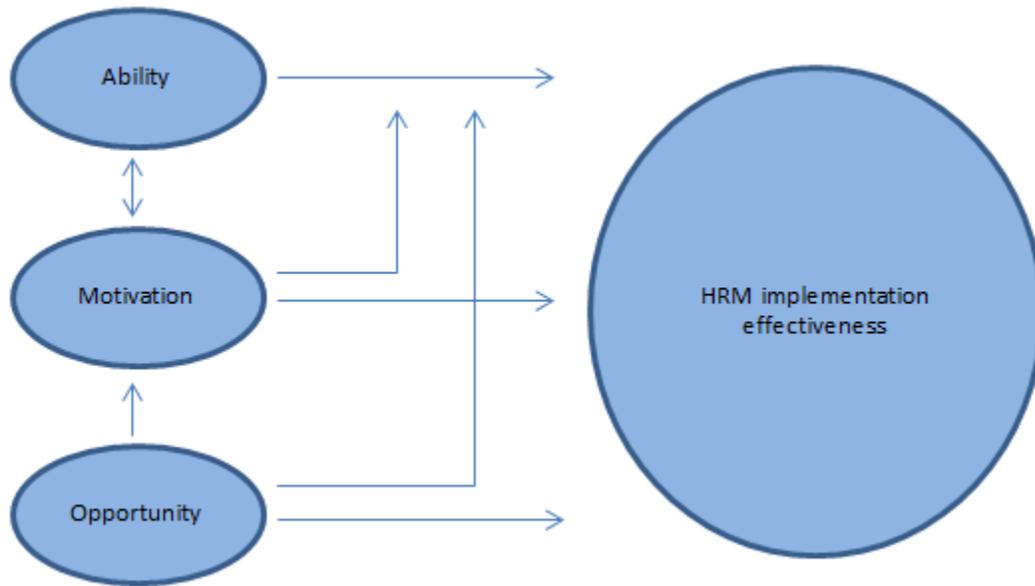


Figure 1: Interactions among AMO factors for HRM implementation effectiveness