
Editorial: HRM implementation in Europe – the need for a dialogue between HR and line management

Anna Bos-Nehles* and Tanya Bondarouk

Human Resource Management Department,
Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences,
University of Twente,
P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede,
The Netherlands
Email: a.c.nehles@utwente.nl
Email: t.bondarouk@utwente.nl
*Corresponding author

When we published a Call for a Special Issue we could not predict that it would take us over three years before you could read it today. We started the process by organising a symposium at the Academy of Management Meeting in 2015, supported by several scholars. We believed in the importance and topicality of the Call as various studies claimed the implementation of human resource management (HRM) was an important factor for the performance, quality and effectiveness of HRM (Gratton and Truss, 2003; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Huselid et al., 1997).

We continued the exploration of HRM implementation that was done by previous Special Issues (e.g., the special issue on Human Resource Management and the Line in *Human Resource Management*, 2013). Our goal was to explore HRM implementation effectiveness in the international arena and to examine its various mechanisms and contextual factors. In the international arena, the implementation of headquarter-centred decisions is dependent on many critical factors, such as cultural, juridical, legislative, strategic and operational differences between subsidiaries. We departed from the idea that the quality of HRM practices developed in headquarters, the relationship between the headquarter and the subsidiary, the relationship between line managers and employees, and HRM professionals, the impact of cross-cultural and cross-national relationships, support by HRM professionals on how to implement HRM practices, (in)consistency of HRM practices with local and national culture, or leadership styles of managers in different countries or cultures – were but few examples of factors that affect the way managers implement HRM practices in an international context.

We define HRM implementation as a process that incorporates all activities necessary to put HRM practices into daily organisational life. HRM practices are rarely implemented universally across organisations and the effectiveness of the implementation may differ considerably between various units or subsidiaries (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Stanton et al., 2008). To understand HRM implementation is to understand its complex multilevel journey, where scholars distinguish different levels, such as the design level (intended HRM practices), the implementation level (actual HRM practices) and the experience level (perceived HRM practices) (Makhecha et al., 2016; Wright and Nishii, 2013). The complexity of HRM implementation is not, however, limited to the variety of levels. It includes various HRM stakeholders, who get involved at different

levels and stages: executive managers, HRM professionals, line managers and employees (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). These actors have different perceptions of HRM practices (Bondarouk et al., 2016; Gerhart et al., 2000; Wright and Snell, 1998; Whitener, 2001) and different aspirations of what is needed to implement them effectively. The result often is tensions between HRM stakeholders (Beer et al., 2015; Bondarouk et al., 2009). Thus, it has been shown that HRM professionals may try to design HRM practices in alignment with the environmental context, the business strategy or already existing organisational practices (Youndt et al., 1996; Paauwe and Boselie, 2005), line managers apply 'pragmatic changes' (Makhecha et al., 2016, p.2) to suit HRM practices to their specific requirements or decide not to implement intended practices (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013), and employees decide to actively consume only selected HRM practices (Meijerink and Bos-Nehles, 2016). Altogether, the HRM implementation drifts in the organisational environment, where 'slight' changes from the intended direction may cascade to huge gaps between designed, implemented and perceived HRM practices (Makhecha et al., 2016; Wright and Nishii, 2013).

To call for a special issue about HRM implementation, with all the described complexities, would be an impossible scholarly mission. To keep it focused, our choice was directed to the delivery modus of HRM, when HRM practices are executed by line managers. Line managers have a critical role in the HRM implementation process (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Brewster et al., 2013) as they are responsible for the management of their subordinates at the operational level for which they use HRM practices. Research has shown that they enjoy a lot of discretion in the extent and way they implement HRM practices and the effectiveness with which they do so (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). They are often regarded as reluctant to execute their HRM responsibilities (Hall and Torrington, 1998; Harris et al., 2002) because they miss the relevant competences and motivation (Hailey et al., 2005). HRM professionals also contribute to the effective implementation of HRM practices, whereas Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) have given them only an evaluative role in the implementation of HRM practices, Trullen et al. (2016) show that they can actively influence HRM implementation effectiveness by managing the ability, motivation and opportunity of line managers in the implementation process. These HRM stakeholders need to cooperate and interact to implement HRM practices effectively (Kuvaas et al., 2014; Makhecha et al., 2016). A harmonious relationship between HRM professionals and line managers is thus essential for effective delivery and calls for a partnership for effective HRM implementation.

This special issue had its own implementation trajectory: initially we received seven interesting and intriguing papers, covering different aspects of HRM implementation and line managers' involvement in it. Papers came from different countries and examined a variety of HRM implementation aspects, such as line managers as key agents in building HRM system strength in Irish knowledge-intensive organisations, a role dynamics theory approach to examining differences between middle and first-line managers in Belgian public organisations, and the role of line managers and co-workers in the HRM-performance relationship during turbulent economic times in Cyprus. All studies showed a variety of theories and research methods, and deserved their place in an academic journal. However, in our view, it was difficult to keep the focus in all the papers in line with the Call. We would like to thank all authors who went for a journey with us, although in the end, we decided to reject their works. Only three studies explicitly

answered the Call: they investigated different aspects of HRM implementation in MNCs, they tried to address globalisation versus localisation issues, and they focused on multiple levels and HRM actors.

The three papers in this special issue all depart from the process view of HRM implementation, in which they focus on different HRM stakeholders. The first paper, by Anna Bos-Nehles, Tanya Bondarouk and Sören Labrenz, identifies multifaceted HRM implementation scenarios in a Dutch subsidiary of a multinational corporation (MNC). They show that the transfer of HRM practices from the HQ to the subsidiary is a process in which subsidiary line managers may ignore, imitate, initiate, deviate, internalise or integrate HRM practices. By focusing on the role of the subsidiary line manager, they reject the idea that line managers are pure executors of HRM practices because they display an active and dynamic role in initiating new HRM practices or deviated from the intended course.

In the second paper the attention moves to the role of HRM professionals in successful and failed HRM implementation processes. Jordi Trullen and Mireia Valverde apply the literature on the use of influence tactics in organisations to the HRM domain and demonstrate how HRM professionals use these tactics to improve HRM implementation effectiveness. Distinguishing between hard and soft influence tactics, they empirically show that consultation and coalition with various HRM stakeholders are crucial for the effective implementation of HRM practices.

The last paper in the special issue builds on the outcomes of the second paper by concentrating on the congruence of HRM frames of HR professionals and line managers in the implementation of HRM change. Huub Ruël and Markus Gbur distinguish between various dimensions of HRM frames in the HRM implementation process: HRM-as-intended, HRM-as-composed, HRM-in-use and HRM-in-integration. By showing the complex process of building HRM frames, one can improve the implementation of HRM practices by working towards a partnership between HRM professionals and line managers through engaging with their HRM frames.

References

- Beer, M., Boselie, P. and Brewster, C. (2015) 'Back to the future: implications for the field of HRM of the multistakeholder perspective proposed 30 years ago', *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp.427–438.
- Bondarouk, T., Ruël, H. and Van der Heijden, B. (2009) 'e-HRM effectiveness in a public-sector organization: a multi-stakeholder perspective', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp.578–590.
- Bondarouk, T., Bos-Nehles, A. and Hesselink, X. (2016) 'Understanding the congruence of HRM frames in a healthcare organization', *Baltic Journal of Management*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp.2–20.
- Bos-Nehles, A.C., Van Riemsdijk, M.J. and Looise, J. (2013) 'Employee perceptions of line management performance: applying the AMO theory to explain the effectiveness of line managers' HRM implementation', *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 52, No. 6, pp.861–877.
- Brewster, C., Gollan, P.J. and Wright, P.M. (2013) 'Guest editors' note: human resource management and the line', *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 52, No. 6, pp.829–838.
- Gerhart, B., Wright, P.M., McMahan, G.C. and Snell, S.A. (2000) 'Measurement error in research on human resources and firm performance: how much error is there and how does it influence effect size estimates?' *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 53, No. 4, pp.803–834.

- Gratton, L. and Truss, C. (2003) 'The three-dimensional people strategy: putting human resources policies into action', *The Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp.74–86.
- Guest, D. and Bos-Nehles, A. (2013) 'HRM and performance: the role of effective implementation', in Paauwe, J., Guest, D. and Wright, P. (Eds): *HRM and Performance: Achievements and Challenges*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, pp.79–96.
- Hall, L. and Torrington, D. (1998) 'Letting go or holding on-the devolution of operational personnel activities', *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp.41–55.
- Harris, L., Doughty, D. and Kirk, S. (2002) 'The devolution of HR responsibilities-perspectives from the UK's public sector', *Journal of European Industrial Training*, Vol. 26, No. 5, pp.218–229.
- Hailey, V.H., Farndale, E. and Truss, C. (2005) 'The HR department's role in organisational performance', *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp.49–66.
- Huselid, M.A., Jackson, S.E. and Schuler, R.S. (1997) 'Technical and strategic human resources management effectiveness as determinants of firm performance', *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp.171–188.
- Kuvaas, B., Dysvik, A. and Buch, R. (2014) 'Antecedents and employee outcomes of line managers' perceptions of enabling HR practices', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 6, pp.845–868.
- Makhecha, U.P., Srinivasan, V., Prabhu, G.N. and Mukherji, S. (2016) 'Multi-level gaps: a study of intended, actual, and experienced human resource practices in a hypermarket chain in India', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2015.1126336.
- Meijerink, J.G. and Bos-Nehles, A.C. (2016) 'Translating high-performance work systems into outcomes: the role of employees' HRM consumption', *Paper presented at the 16th European Academy of Management Annual Conference*, 1–4 June, Paris, France.
- Paauwe, J. and Boselie, P. (2005) 'HRM and performance: What next?' *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp.68–83.
- Purcell, J. and Hutchinson, S. (2007) 'Front-line managers as agents in the HRM-performance causal chain: theory, analysis and evidence', *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp.3–20.
- Stanton, P., Young, S., Bartram, T. and Leggat, S. (2008) 'Singing the same song: translating HRM messages across management hierarchies in Australian hospitals', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 21, pp.567–581.
- Trullen, J., Stirpe, L., Bonache, J. and Valverde, M. (2016) 'The HR department's contribution to line managers' effective implementation of HR practices', *Human Resource Management Journal*, DOI: 10.1111/1748-8583.12116.
- Whitener, E.M. (2001) 'Do "high commitment" human resource practices affect employee commitment? A cross-level analysis using hierarchical linear modeling', *Journal of Management*, Vol. 27, No. 5, pp.515–535.
- Wright, P.M. and Nishii, L.H. (2013) 'Strategic HRM and organizational behaviour: integrating multiple levels of analysis', in Paauwe, J., Guest, D. and Wright, P. (Eds): *HRM and Performance: Achievements and Challenges*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, pp.97–110.
- Wright, P.M. and Snell, S.A. (1998) 'Toward a unifying framework for exploring fit and flexibility in strategic human resource management', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp.756–772.
- Youndt, M.A., Snell, S.A., Dean, J.W. and Lepak, D.P. (1996) 'Human resource management, manufacturing strategy, and firm performance', *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp.836–866.