HRM Implementation by Multiple HRM Actors: A Social Exchange Perspective

Abstract

In this study, we understand HRM implementation as a social process that depends on the social exchange relationships between line managers and both HR professionals and employees. As such, we offer a fresh approach to understanding HRM implementation by concentrating on the social exchange among HRM actors. We do so by investigating to what extent these exchange relationships influence HRM implementation, as reflected in employees’ perceptions of the presence of HRM practices and their affective commitment. We collected multilevel data from two sources (line managers and employees) and in two phases in a Dutch engineering firm, and obtained fully matched manager–employee information from 75 employees and 20 line managers. Our results show that employees perceive a larger number of HRM practices when they have a good relationship with their line managers and when their line managers are motivated to implement HRM practices. Line managers, in turn, reciprocate perceived support from the HR department with greater motivation to implement these practices. We conclude that because HRM actors engage in social interactions, HRM practices will be implemented at the organizational level because employees perceive the presence of HRM practices and then reciprocate this with affective commitment.

Keywords: HRM implementation; social exchange theory; HRM practices; HRM perceptions; employee attitudes and behaviours; line manager
Introduction

How human resource management (HRM) practices are implemented is increasingly considered important in determining whether the desired HRM outcomes are realized (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). Here, researchers acknowledge that HRM practices, as designed by top managers and HR managers, are limited in their effectiveness unless they are actually put to use and experienced by employees (Wright & Nishii, 2013). An appraisal practice, for example, might be well designed based on best practices and the latest trends, but employees will not perceive the appraisal system unless it is implemented at the operational level. Inspired by the editorial of Bondarouk, Trullen and Valverde (2018) and the work of Bos-Nehles, Bondarouk and Labrenz (2017), we understand HRM practice implementation as a process in which intended HRM practices need to be perceived by employees if they are to be used on a daily basis. Thus, in this paper, we consider HRM implementation to require employees to perceive the presence of HRM practices in the organization. This conceptualization further assumes that employees can only perceive the presence of HRM practices if they are regularly used in the organization.

Line managers are usually considered to play an essential role in implementing HRM practices because they are the primary implementers of HRM practices at the organizational level (Bos-Nehles, Van Riemsdijk & Looise, 2013; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Woodrow & Guest, 2014). In this role, they shape employees’ perceptions of HRM (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Sikora & Ferris, 2014) and employee outcomes (Gilbert et al., 2011). However, line managers are not alone in the process of HRM implementation in that they are supported by various HRM actors, such as HR professionals and employees. HR professionals are considered primarily important for their role in designing and introducing HRM practices in an organization (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). Further, Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) and Gilbert et al. (2011) advocate a role for HR
professionals in facilitating line managers in the HRM implementation process. Employees are also ascribed a supporting role in the co-production of HRM practices when they support HRM implementation by discussing feedback with their manager or participating in managerial decision-making (Meijerink & Bos-Nehles, 2017; Meijerink, Bondarouk & Lepak, 2016). It is unlikely that this support that line managers receive will directly affect the HRM implementation effectiveness. However, line managers might well reciprocate through increased motivation to engage in the HRM implementation, a relationship which we will justify using social exchange theory (Blau, 1964).

As noted by Brewster, Gollan and Wright (2013), we still know little about the relationships and interactions among HRM actors and the way these relationships impact on employees’ perceptions of HRM. Building on a relational approach, we propose adopting an exchange perspective to understand HRM implementation. Based on the theory of social exchange (Blau, 1964), HRM implementation can be understood as a social process in which implementation depends on the social exchange relationships among HRM actors. These actors are required to cooperate and interact for HRM practices to be implemented in the organization (Kuvaas, Dysvik & Buch, 2014; Makhecha et al., 2016). Through interactions, HRM actors engage in mutual exchanges that yield a pattern of reciprocal obligations among the parties (Blau, 1964), and these actions ‘are contingent on rewarding reactions from others’ (Emerson, 1976, p. 336). We argue that these exchanges and social relationships result in employees perceiving the presence of HRM practices, which they may reciprocate by being affectively committed to the organization. This argument is supported by research outcomes showing that employees are in social exchange relationships with their organization (Alfes, Shantz, Truss & Soane, 2013; Aryee, Budhwar & Chen, 2002; Gould-Williams & Davis, 2005) and that, when employees perceive HRM practices
as investments in their own development and well-being, they may feel the need to reciprocate through displaying the desired attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Farndale, van Ruiten, Kelliher & Hope-Hailey, 2011; Whitener, 2001). In this paper, we aim to develop an understanding of how exchange relationships affect the HRM implementation process and thus answer the question: to what extent do exchange relationships between line managers and both HR professionals and employees influence employees’ perceptions of the presence of HRM practices and their affective commitment?

This paper contributes to the HRM implementation literature by drawing on social exchange theory and using it to show how HRM implementation depends on the social exchange relationships between line managers and HR professionals and between line managers and employees, and that HRM implementation affects affective commitment because employees reciprocate welcomed HRM practices with something valuable to the organization. Adopting this focus, we contribute in two ways to the understanding of HRM implementation. First, next to employees feeling obliged to repay the content of HRM practices through affective commitment, they also reciprocate the process of HRM implementation. Here, since social exchange theorists also claim that employees are in a social exchange with organizational members (Blau, 1964), we argue that social exchange relationships will contribute to employees perceiving the presence of HRM practices. That is, employees will be more exposed to HRM practices when they are in a high-quality relationship with their line manager, and when line managers feel supported by the HR department. Second, we apply two conceptualizations of social exchange to the implementation of HRM: first, line managers’ perceived organizational support (POS), i.e. the exchange relationship between line managers and the organization; and, second, leader-member exchange (LMX), i.e. the exchange relationship between line managers and employees. Settoon, Bennett and
Liden (1996) and Wayne, Shore and Liden (1997) have called for these two conceptualizations to be used together and integrated. In responding, this paper presents a broader approach to exchange relationships in the implementation of HRM practices and considers how the interdependencies among line managers, HR professionals and employees contribute to HRM implementation.

Below, we start by developing a multi-actor HRM implementation model based on social exchange theory and translate this into testable hypotheses about the interrelationships among the exchange partners and employees’ HRM perceptions and outcomes. We then present our data based on a two-wave survey study in a single organization that is then used to test our hypotheses using hierarchical linear modelling. We finalize the paper by discussing our findings in terms of the HRM implementation process and discuss the theoretical and practical implications for an HRM implementation process.

**Exchange Relationships among HRM Actors**

In this study, we build on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to understand the HRM implementation process. A social exchange is seen as ‘a two-sided, mutually contingent, and mutually rewarding process’ (Emerson, 1976, p. 336) that involves a series of interdependent interactions that are contingent on someone else’s actions (Blau, 1964). These exchanges entail unspecified obligations that mean that when one individual does a favour for someone else, this individual will expect some future return. This expectation is based on an individual trusting the other party to fulfil their obligations in a fair way (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). This is in line with the norm of reciprocity, requiring the receiver of a benefit to respond in a positive way by providing something beneficial in return (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). According to Blau (1964),
exchange processes evolve because people aim to weigh inputs and outputs, and achieve a positive balance in their transactions.

The literature distinguishes between two types of social exchange: exchange between organizational individuals and their organization and with their immediate supervisor (Settoon, Bennett & Liden, 1996; Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). While the first relationship is somewhat broad, and usually conceptualized as perceived organizational support (POS), the second relationship is a more focused, dyadic relationship between subordinates and their superiors and is usually conceptualized as leader–member exchange (LMX) (Settoon et al., 1996). In this paper, we respond to the call to combine both these concepts of social exchange theory (Settoon et al., 1996; Wayne at al., 1997). We do so by distinguishing two exchange relationships: the relationship that line managers have with the organization (and its representatives) and their relationship with the individual employees they supervise.

Given that we are relating both social exchange relationships to the implementation of HRM, we consider the HR department, and its staff with whom line managers engage, as representing organizational interests. The HR department forms an intermediate level between the managerial level and the operational level (Cascio, 2005; Lawler III & Mohrman, 2003), and thus we interpret the social exchange between line managers and the HR department in terms of POS. Levinson (1965) noted that employees view actions by agents of the organization as actions of the organization itself and, therefore, line managers may perceive support services provided by members of the HR department as the organization investing in their wellbeing. On this basis, rather than addressing the exchange between line managers and HR professionals on an individual level, we consider the exchange relationship between line managers and the HR department on an aggregated level. As such, irrespective of any poor individual relationships between line managers
and individual HR professionals, line managers might have a good exchange relationship with the collective HR department if the HRM services are valued and respected.

Organizations have an interest in HRM practices being implemented and, since line managers are the main implementers of HRM (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013), they have an interest in engaging in social exchanges with line managers by facilitating and supporting them in the implementation process. To reciprocate the HRM services provided by the HR department, line managers will engage in a social exchange relationship with the organization because they feel obligated to help the organization achieve its objectives (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). As a response, they become motivated to implement HRM practices at the operational level.

Once line managers implement actual HRM practices, another exchange relationship needs to be considered in the HRM implementation process: the one between line managers and employees. LMX theory posits that employees actively shape the social exchange relationship with their manager, and that this relationship will have a strong influence on employees’ perceptions of HRM practices (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Wright & Nishii, 2013). The line manager – employee relationship can be characterized as a partnership in which employees perceive a two-way exchange between line management and employees based on mutual respect, trust and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) to which they can contribute by supporting the line manager in implementing HRM practices (Meijerink et al., 2016). Based on the above, HRM implementation can be described as a ‘two-sided, mutually contingent, and mutually rewarding process’ (Emerson, 1976, p. 336) that requires exchange relationships between line managers and the organization and between line managers and employees.

**Hypotheses Development**
We argue that the support provided by the organization plays an important role in HRM implementation by motivating line managers to implement HRM practices. The organization can boost line managers’ motivation to implement HRM practices by motivation-enhancing initiatives (Trullen, Stirpe, Bonache & Valverde, 2016). These actions could be directed at facilitation, through which members of the HR department offer support in implementing HRM practices in various forms such as advice (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013), support services (Gilbert et al., 2011) and consultation (Trullen et al., 2016). Line managers might also feel facilitated by their employer managing their capacity, that is by providing sufficient time for HRM responsibilities, by limiting time pressures on them (e.g. McConville, 2006) and by helping them balance the ‘conflicting demands and competing priorities between operational and HRM tasks’ (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013, p. 866). This facilitation could be provided by the HR department but also by more senior managerial employees in the organization, such as their own manager or department managers who set priorities and allocate resources (including time) that line managers can spend on HRM activities. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) suggest that line managers would feel obliged to repay such HRM support and capacity provided by the organization with something of value to the organization. A perception of HRM support signals to line managers the importance that is placed on implementing HRM and increases line managers’ desire to reciprocate, which can be effectuated by implementing HRM practices. This realization that these practices would allow them to contribute to organizational goals is why line managers may be more motivated to implement HRM practices. Further, Tepper and Taylor (2003) suggest that line managers might decide to reciprocate supportive actions by the HR department through increased support of other employees, such as their subordinates. They may perceive managing employees as a form of extra-role behaviour that can be used to reciprocate favourable treatment from their employer. The motivation to implement HRM practices effectively may then
serve as a form of reciprocation towards the employer because they use these practices to manage their employees and support their subordinates to perform well. Both forms of reciprocation help their employer to achieve its organizational goals (Wayne et al., 1997). This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Line managers’ perceptions of their organization’s HRM support (H1a) and provided capacity (H1b) are positively related with their motivation to implement HRM practices.

We expect line managers’ motivation to implement HRM practices, in turn, to relate to employees’ perceptions of the presence of these HRM practices. Such a perception is particularly likely when the managers’ motivation stems from a desire to reciprocate the support that is offered by the organization and its representatives. That is, motivated managers will put significant effort into ensuring that HRM practices are regularly offered to employees since this will ultimately make them more committed to the organization (Herrbach, Mignonac, Vandenberghhe & Negrini, 2009). This, in turn, is likely to make a positive contribution to the degree to which employees’ experience HRM practices being implemented within their organization. Here, social information processing theorists (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggest that managers provide the context within which employees form their perceptions regarding the presence of HRM practices. That is, line managers who are motivated to implement HRM practices will likely talk about and communicate such practices to their employees (Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg & Kroon, 2013), which helps employees understand the type of HRM practices being used within the organization (Jiang, Hu, Liu & Lepak, 2017). Second, motivated line managers who actually implement HRM practices will spend significant time with their subordinates and thus ensure that ‘HR practices can easily capture the attention of workers’ (Rye & Kim, 2013, p. 949). That is, when a line manager actively engages in HRM practices, employees are likely to experience their appraisal as focussing on personal
development and that the training offered is geared towards personal development, as well as organizational interests, which they may reciprocate in ways that benefit the organization. In support of this line of argument, research has shown that line managers report their use of HRM practices to be positively related with employees’ perceptions of the presence of these practices (Den Hartog et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2017). This leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Line managers’ motivation to implement HRM practices is positively related with employees’ perceptions of the presence of HRM practices.

Besides line manager motivation, we also expect employees’ HRM perceptions to be dependent on the social relationships they have with their manager. Further, employees’ perceptions of the presence of HRM practices are strongly influenced by the support they experience (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010). LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) suggests that leaders and followers can develop relationships that mature into a partnership between line managers and employees. This social exchange relationship can be characterized as a high-quality one in which line managers and employees perceive mutual respect, trust and obligation. The relationship between a line manager and subordinates is important in that it influences employees’ understanding of the support received or available from the organization (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Settoon et al., 1996). We assume that LMX is positively related with employees’ perceptions of HRM practices for two reasons. First, applying the conservation of resources theory, we argue that LMX is an important resource upon which other resources can be built. Establishing a high-quality LMX relationship between line managers and employees will result in line managers providing more job resources to their employees, and employees will perceive this in the sense of being offered more job resources such as training, developmental opportunities and social support (Breevaart, Bakker, Demerouti & Van den Heuvel, 2015). As argued by Liao et al. (2009), line
managers differentiate between their employees in the extent to which they offer them HRM practices depending on the quality of their relationship with the individual employees. The belief is that employees who have a high-quality LMX with their supervisor will benefit in terms of receiving more HRM practices (Liden & Graen, 1980). Since employees’ perceptions of HRM are dependent on the degree to which they are offered HRM practices (Den Hartog et al., 2013; Jiang, et al., 2017), we expect LMX to be positively related with employees’ perceptions of the presence of HRM practices.

Second, based on the ideas of organizational support theory, individual employees who are in a high-quality relationship with their manager are usually more satisfied with their manager (Farndale et al., 2011; Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010; Settoon et al., 1996). Kuvaas and Dysvik (2010) found that when employees perceive support from their line manager, they interpret this as their organization investing in their development. As a response to feeling appreciated and supported, they reciprocate positively (Liden, Sparrowe & Wayne, 1997) by performing in ways beyond what is required of them in the formal employment contract (Settoon et al., 1996). One way that employees can do this is by supporting their manager in implementing HRM practices. Although managers are formally tasked with implementing HRM practices, they often need the support of the employees who have to actually go to training sessions, prepare appraisal talks, be open to performance feedback, or willing to participate in decision-making (Meijerink & Bos-Nehles, 2017. Employees who enjoy a high-quality relationship with their manager are more likely to be motivated to reciprocate by supporting their manager in implementing HRM practices because such practices are highly beneficial to managers by allowing them to meet their performance targets.
In addition to the theoretical arguments, there is empirical evidence of the effect of LMX on how employees perceive HRM practices. For example, Martinson and Deleon (2016) showed that employees who had positive perceptions of their supervisors also perceived the offered HRM practices more positively. Sanders et al. (2010) showed that LMX had a positive effect on employees’ satisfaction with HRM practices in four technical organizations. Since line managers are inclined to reserve their scarce HRM resources and provide more support to those employees with whom they have a high-quality LMX relationship, such employees are more exposed to the HRM practices and therefore more likely to experience them as present. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007, p. 16) talk of an ‘interactive and dynamic relationship between the leadership behaviour of line managers and the impact of HR practices’ and stress that LMX is related to employees’ HRM perceptions. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Employees’ perceptions of the leader-member exchange relationship with their line manager are positively related with their perceptions of the presence of HRM practices.

Besides being dependent on social exchanges, HRM implementation also triggers new social exchanges as employees’ experiences of HRM practices are interpretations of organizational actions that will eventually affect their attitudes and behaviours. According to Guest (1999), employees’ perceptions of HRM practices are strongly associated with employee outcomes, including affective organizational commitment, that reflect social exchanges. Affective commitment refers to employees’ emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990). It is the employees’ perceptions of the HRM ‘reality’ that influence their commitment to the organization (Conway & Monks, 2008; Gould-Williams & Davis, 2005). That is, employees understand the presence of HRM practices as a personalized commitment to them by the organization, which they reciprocate through affective commitment
towards the organization (Alfes, Shantz, Truss & Soane, 2013; Whitener, 2001). The presence of HRM practices may be understood as a signal of an intention to invest long-term in employees that obliges employees to respond with something of value for the organization, such as affective commitment (Agarwala, 2003; Aryee, Walumbwa, Seidu & Otaye, 2012; Farndale et al., 2011; Gilbert, De Winne & Sels, 2011). Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: An employee’s perceptions of the presence of HRM practices are positively relate with their affective commitment.

The hypotheses are visualized in Figure 1.

Methodology

Sample and procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a study within a Dutch engineering firm that offers engineering services to high-tech companies in the medical, aerospace and semiconductor industries. Since we were interested in differences in employee perceptions of HRM within and across organizational units, we invited all 22 teams operating within the engineering firm to participate in our study. In order to examine the temporal linkages among the study variables and reduce common method bias, we collected multilevel data from two sources (line managers and employees), in two approaches (surveys and archival data) and in two phases.

Specifically, at Time 1, the line managers, who each led one of the 22 teams, were asked to complete a survey to record their motivation as well as the perceived support and capacity provided to them to implement HRM practices. We surveyed the line managers, rather than the HR
professionals, to assess the level of support and capacity provided since perceptions of capacity and support have been found to vary on the line-manager level (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013) and because we were interested in line managers’ perceptions of their social exchange with the organization as a potential antecedent of their motivation to implement HRM. In addition, at Time 1, we invited the employees, who were supervised by these line managers, to complete a survey concerning their LMX relationship with their manager. Since employees from different employment categories have been found to differ in the delivery and thus implementation of HRM practices (Liao, Toya, Lepak & Hong, 2009), we excluded temporary employees (75) as they might not be in a position to assess HRM practices and workplace relationships accurately. All the remaining employees (N = 236) were invited to complete the survey. At Time 2, we invited those individual employees who responded to the survey at Time 1, to fill out a second survey about their experiences related to the presence of HRM practices. We split the two employee-level variables (LMX and perceived HRM) across the two measurement points in order to avoid the respondents implicitly testing them (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003). An interval of ten weeks was left between the two phases so that the respondents would not recall their initial responses when completing the second survey. Employee demographic information was obtained from the firm’s archival data.

The research team personally delivered the printed surveys to both the line managers and the employees, and later collected them, since this allowed to know who had participated and match employees to their specific line managers. The respondents were assured of confidentiality and informed that nobody from the engineering firm would receive or have access to their responses. To further minimize confidentially concerns, we did not include questions about the name, location, team or personal demographic information. Instead, this information was obtained from the
engineering firm’s databases. This procedure yielded a response rate of 91% among the line managers (i.e. 20 individual responses) at Time 1, and response rates of 48% (i.e. 114 responses) and 32% (i.e. 75 responses) among the employees at Time 1 and Time 2 respectively\(^1\). The average response rate per team at Time 2 was 29%. As such, the process resulted in a final usable sample of complete matched manager–employee information from 75 employees liked to 20 teams/line managers. Therefore, the average number of responses per team was 3.75 (SD = 3).

Of the line managers, 90% were male and most had been employed there between five to ten years, with a similar period of experience as a line manager. Their average age was 50 (SD = 9); and they supervised a team that consisted of ten employees on average. Of the employees, 77% were male; 84% had a permanent full-time contract; 67% had at least higher vocational education or a university degree, their average age was 48 (SD = 10) and had an average tenure of 19 years (SD = 15 years). To assess non-response bias, we compared the demographic characterises and LMX of the 75 employees who completed both surveys with the 40 workers who only responded at Time 1. ANOVA tests showed that those who only responded at Time 1 were not significantly different from those who completed both surveys: gender (percentage of females = 25%, F = .058, p = .81); contract type (percentage with full-time contract = 80%, F = .196, p = .66); educational level (percentage with at least higher vocational education or a university degree 75%, F = .52, p = .47); age (mean = 49, SD = 9, F = .003, p = .96); tenure (mean = 16, SD = 15; F = 1.255, p = .27); and LMX (mean = 3.50, SD = .79, F = .86, p = .36).

**Measures of Group-Level / Managerial Variables**

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\(^1\) Only employees who completed the survey at Time 1 were invited to participate in the second round at Time 2.
We relied on existing scales for measuring the variables in which we were interested. Since our research population was working in the Netherlands, we translated the existing English scales into Dutch and asked a research assistant who is proficient in Dutch and English to translate them back to English as an accuracy check. Respondents were asked to respond on five-point Likert scales ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. An overview of the scales can be found in the appendix.

*Capacity for Implementing HRM Practices*

To measure the capacity granted to line managers for implementing HRM practices, we used a scale by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013) adapted from the role overload scale of Reilly (1982) which measures the degree to which line managers perceive themselves to have sufficient time for implementing HRM practices. The scale consists of five items, and an example item is ‘I feel I have to perform HRM practices hastily’ (reversed item). The Cronbach alpha was .81.

*HRM Support from the HR Department*

To measure the support offered to line managers by the HR department, we relied on the support scale developed by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013). This scale is an adapted version of the service quality scale of Parasuraman et al. (1988) and includes seven items for measuring the quality of support provided by HR professionals to line managers including ‘the HR professionals in my firm have the necessary knowledge to answer my questions’. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .86.

*Motivation for Implementing HRM Practices*

To measure line managers’ motivation for implementing HRM practices, we relied on the desire scale developed by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013). This scale is an adapted version of the situational
motivation scale of Guay et al. (2000) and includes nine items. We used this scale as it measures both the intrinsic motivation (e.g. ‘I implement HRM practices because it is fun’) and extrinsic motivation (‘I don't know; I don't see what implementing these HRM practices brings me’ – reversed item) of managers to implement HRM practices. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .83.

**Measures of Individual-Level Employee Variables**

**Leader–Member Exchange**

To assess the leader–member exchange relationship, as viewed by the employee, we relied on the seven-item scale developed by Liden, Wayne and Stilwell (1993) for measuring employees’ view on the quality of the exchange relationship with their manager. An example item is ‘I can count on my supervisor to “bail me out” even at his or her own expense, when I really need it’. Employees could respond using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The Cronbach alpha of this LMX scale was .90.

**Employee Perceptions of the Presence of HRM Practices**

To measure the employee perceptions of the presence of HRM practices, we relied on the scales of Liao et al. (2009) and Takeuchi, Lepak, Wang and Takeuchi (2007). We did so in order to be consistent with the taxonomy of HRM practices examined in previous studies presented by Posthuma, Campion, Masimova and Campion (2013). We measured employees’ perceptions of the presence of seven HRM practices: staffing (6 items); training (6 items); performance management (3 items); compensation and benefits (6 items); job design (5 items); and participation (5 items). Employees could respond to the items using a five-point Likert scale. The Cronbach alphas of the individual scales ranged from .72 to .87. In line with the insights from strategic HRM research, that

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HRM practices are best understood in terms of their integrated whole rather than by the individual HRM practices, we created an overarching construct, combining the seven subscales described above, to measure employees’ perceptions of high-commitment HRM. Consistent with Liao et al. (2009), we ran a confirmatory factor analysis using item parcels. Each item parcel measured the employees’ perceptions of a single HRM practice. We tested a model that assumed that all the item parcels together would represent the overarching construct of employee perceptions of HRM. The factor analysis confirmed the validity of this model ($\chi^2(8) = 4.85; p = .77; CFI = 1.00; GFI = .98; RMR = .00; RMSEA = .00$).

**Affective Commitment**

To measure employees’ affective commitment, we relied on the widely-used scale of Allen and Meyer (1990) which includes eight items to which employees respond using a five-point Likert scale. A sample item being: ‘I do not feel like “part of the family” at this organization’ (reversed item). The Cronbach alpha of this scale was .66.

**Control Variables**

We controlled for both age and tenure of the line managers and employees because older workers and those with longer tenures have been found to be less in favour of HRM practices (Bal, Kooij & De Jong, 2013) and, therefore, might be less likely to implement them. The data on line manager and employee age and tenure was obtained from the organization’s databases. Contract type was measured in terms of the number of working hours to assess the degree to which employees work full-time, with the data again obtained from the company’s databases. We controlled for this variable since part-time workers have less time in which to perceive HRM practices. Finally, we also controlled for the effect of line manager abilities to implement HRM because previous research
on HRM implementation has suggested that there are interrelationships between line managers’ ability and motivation as well as between their ability and capacity (e.g. Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). Here, we relied on the abilities measurement scale developed by Bos-Nehles et al. (2013).

**Data Analysis**

In our study population, employees were nested in teams, with some of our study variables (i.e. line manager motivation) being measured at the team level since each team had a single line manager. Given the nested and hierarchical structure of our data, we should not assume that employee observations are independent where they share a line manager. To check this assumption, we ran an ANOVA and observed a significant intra-class correlation (ICC(1)) value of .42 for employees’ perceptions of HRM. This indicates that 42% of the variance in the degree to which employees perceive HRM practices results from differences among teams and, thus, in line managers’ characteristics, such as their motivation to implement HRM. We therefore carried out a multilevel analysis, using Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) software (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), to ensure that we correctly interpreted the data nested on the employee level and reliably tested our multilevel hypotheses. In testing our hypotheses on the antecedents of line manager motivation, we applied traditional least square regression analysis in SPSS, since these data reside on a single (i.e. team) level.

**Findings**

**Correlations**

The correlations between the variables of interest are presented in Table 1. In line with our hypotheses, Table 1 shows that both line managers’ capacity and their support for implementing HRM practices are positively and significantly related with their motivation to implement HRM.
Further, LMX is significantly and positively related with employees’ perceptions of HRM, and the perceived presence of HRM practices is significantly and positively related to affective commitment. As can be seen in Table 1, the correlations between line manager age and tenure and between employee age and tenure are both high and this could lead to multicollinearity problems. To check whether this could affect our results, we compared several structural models that excluded either age or tenure. The results of these various models were similar suggesting that the conclusions on the effects of our focal variables were valid. As such, we are confident that our results (presented below) are not affected by the high correlations between age and tenure.

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Insert Table 1 about here
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Relating Capacity and Support to Line Manager Motivation to Implement HRM

Hypotheses 1a and 1b suggest that a line manager’s capacity and support for implementing HRM practices are positively related with their motivation to implement HRM. As shown in Table 2, both line manager support ($\beta = .66, p < .001$) and capacity ($\beta = .53, p < .01$) are positively related with line manager motivation, and explain a significant proportion of the variance in line managers’ motivation to implement HRM ($\Delta R^2 = .59$). As such, Hypotheses 1a and 1b are supported.

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Insert Table 2 about here
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Relating both Motivation to Implement HRM and LMX to Employees’ Perceptions of HRM Practices being Present
Hypothesis 2 states that a line manager’s motivation to implement HRM practices and their employees’ perceptions of the presence of HRM practices are positively related. As can be seen in Table 3, after controlling for the effect of a line manager’s abilities to implement such practices, their motivation is positively and significantly related with their employees’ perceptions of HRM practices being present ($\gamma = .30$, $p < .05$), lending support to Hypothesis 2.

Further, Hypothesis 3 states that an employee’s perception of their LMX relationship with their line manager is positively related with their perceptions of HRM practices. As shown in Table 2, our analysis found LMX to be positively related with employees’ perceptions of HRM ($\gamma = .23$, $p < .001$) and, as such, Hypothesis 3 is accepted.

Insert Table 3 about here

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Relating Employees’ Perceptions of HRM to Affective Commitment

Finally, Hypothesis 4 claims a positive relationship between an employee’s perceptions of HRM and their affective commitment towards the organization. As can be seen in Table 3, the HRM perceptions of employees are indeed significantly and positively related with affective commitment ($\gamma = .43$, $p < .01$), supporting our final hypothesis.

Discussion

This study set out to investigate how exchange relationships affect the HRM implementation process. To do this, we focused on the relationships among HRM actors in this process. Previous research has shown that employees’ perceptions of HRM practices and leadership behaviour determine their responses to HRM activities and thus their attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Purcell &
Hutchinson, 2007). In this study, we stressed that HRM practices are only implemented when employees perceive their presence and that, in addressing this aspect, one should consider the exchange relationships between various HRM actors. After all, it is only after perceiving the presence of HRM practices that employees can reciprocate the benefits they accrue from their implementation through strategic attitudes and behaviours. Our data show that employees do reciprocate HRM implementation, with affective commitment to the organization. Given the recognition of the importance of the relationships among the various HR stakeholders for the implementation of HRM practices (e.g. Kuvaas et al., 2014), we investigated the exchange relationships of line managers with both employees as well as the HR department to understand the HRM implementation process.

The results of our study confirm the critical role that line managers play in HRM implementation in that employees’ perceptions of HRM practices are strongly influenced by their line manager’s motivation to implement these practices and by their LMX relationship with the line manager. This implies that employees will more strongly perceive the presence of HRM practices if their line managers are motivated to take HRM practices and their implementation seriously, and have invested in establishing a good relationship with their subordinates. In such a situation, employees will, according to social exchange theory, reciprocate for receiving such benefits with something in return. Since employees who are supervised by a motivated line manager, with whom they have a high-quality relationship, will be more exposed to HRM practices, they will more strongly perceive their presence in the organization and will reciprocate with affective commitment.

However, the extent to which line managers will be motivated to participate in the HRM implementation process will depend on the support they receive from the organization. Our results
showed that line managers are more motivated to execute HRM practices when they perceive the organization, especially through its HR professionals, as actively investing in supporting the line and providing them with sufficient capacity to engage in HRM implementation. Line managers will reciprocate perceived support by helping their employees to perform better but, to do this, they need to be motivated to implement the HRM practices and help their employees to improve. The organization providing and the line managers accepting support services, and then reciprocating through motivation to implement HRM practices, are indicators of a two-way, mutually contingent exchange relationship between these two HR stakeholders.

**Theoretical implications**

In order for HRM practices to be implemented at the operational level, one has to consider the interdependencies between line managers and both HR professionals and employees. These stakeholders engage in social processes with each other, and we therefore aimed to understand the extent to which the exchange relationships among these HRM actors determine the employees’ perceptions of the presence of HRM practices and their affective commitment. Our results have shown that line managers are more motivated to engage in HRM implementation when they perceive a supportive HR department, and that they are willing to reciprocate the services provided by the organization with motivation to engage in HRM implementation. In addition, the exchange relationship between line managers and employees is also crucial in the implementation process. Here, employees who perceive a high-quality relationship with their line managers, and feel that the line is engaged in implementing HRM practices, have a stronger perception of HRM practices because their line managers are motivated to offer more practices and because they are also exposed to more practices due to the time they spend with their supervisor and their good relationship. These employees reciprocate the many offered HRM practices with increased commitment to the
organization. As such, we have been able to show that social exchanges between HRM actors contribute to employees’ perceptions of the presence of beneficial HRM practices and that employees are willing to reciprocate these practices through their commitment to the organization. We thus believe that it is important to take a holistic perspective when looking at HRM implementation. We have further confirmed what we already knew: that HRM content helps in building social exchanges through which employees reciprocate HRM offerings with desired attitudes and behaviours (Alfes et al., 2013; Aryee et al., 2012; Farndale et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 2012). Beyond confirming that employees who perceive beneficial HRM practices in the organization reciprocate by increasing their commitment to the organization, we were able to build on this knowledge by showing that social exchanges also contribute to the HRM process. This was achieved by applying both conceptualizations of social exchanges – POS and LMX – and emphasizing that the process of implementing HRM practices is dependent on the social exchange relationships between multiple actors in this HRM implementation process. For HRM practices to be successfully implemented, line managers need to have a good social exchange relationship with HR professionals (as representatives of the organization) as well as with their employees. Particularly for strategic HRM - and specifically the implementation of HRM - these results imply that we need to study the interrelationships among the multiple HRM actors involved to explain why and how HRM will be successfully implemented and influence the desired outcomes.

Our results, in comparison to other studies (e.g. Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Gilbert et al., 2012), have further revealed that line managers’ motivation to implement HRM does affect employees’ perceptions of HRM. While those earlier studies found only a non-significant effect of line managers’ motivation on the perceived effectiveness of HRM, we studied the perceived presence of HRM. The distinct findings imply that the different perceptions of HRM (its presence
and effectiveness) have different antecedents. This also suggests that although motivated line managers may make employees more aware of the HRM practices provided, by showing them which HRM practices are available in the organization, this may not influence the employees’ perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of these practices.

**Practical Implications**

The results of this study are relevant for various HR stakeholders because they imply that improving exchange relationships between members on different organizational levels pays off in the sense that it helps HRM practices become implemented in the organization. Recognizing that the implementation of HRM practices depends on multiple actors, organizations should invest in establishing effective social exchange relationships between HR professionals and line managers as well as between line managers and employees by focusing on enabling high-quality mutual interactions between these actors. For HR professionals, this may mean building a social exchange relationship with line managers if they want them to implement HRM practices at the operational level. Line managers should also invest in this relationship if they value the support services provided by the organization. This investment makes sense for both parties since HRM practices have no value unless they are implemented at the operational level. HR professionals should understand that, if they support line managers and provide them with sufficient time for their HRM responsibilities, the line managers will become motivated to reciprocate this investment. This result also implies that HR professionals can narrow the gap between intended and actual HRM practices (Makhecha et al., 2016; Wright & Nishii, 2013) by building a trusting relationship with line managers, through which the line managers become motivated to implement the HRM practices as intended. Another reason for HR professionals to build an exchange relationship with line managers is the indirect effect this relationship has on employee perceptions and outcomes. If they
succeed in facilitating line managers in such a way that they become motivated to engage in HRM implementation, employees will then perceive the presence of HRM practices and reciprocate through affective commitment to the organization.

Line managers should also invest in exchange relationships with their subordinates if they want employees to actually perceive the HRM practices on offer and engage in their implementation. Line managers should understand that the support the organization offers through HRM practices can help them boost their employees’ commitment to the organization and thus contribute to organizational goals.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Our study, as any other, should acknowledge its limitations. First, although we have stressed the importance of the social exchanges between various HRM actors, we have only used data from line managers and employees in our study. We have acknowledged the HR department as representing the organization, and it would have been beneficial to have included data from members of the HR department rather than just rely on line managers’ perceptions of the assistance provided by the organization. Nevertheless, we would argue that it is line managers’ perceptions of the social exchange with the organization that is reciprocated through increased motivation to implement HRM practices effectively, provided they perceive these as beneficial and valuable. Studying exchange relationships involving other organizational actors, such as top managers (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013), senior line managers (Guest & Conway, 2011), middle-line managers (McConville, 2006) and trades-union representatives (Delmotte, De Winne & Sels, 2012), could help extend our understanding of social exchange relationships involving HRM actors. Nevertheless, our focus on employee and line management perceptions of relationships between line managers and both
employees and the organization have been sufficient to derive an understanding of the line manager – organization and line manager – employee relationships. Future research could, however, investigate whether the support perceived by line managers could be influenced by various other sources such as the organization level and the organizational structure (Op de Beeck, Wynen & Hondeghem, 2017).

Second, our focus on social exchange relationships required the use of matched dyads, and we therefore required matched manager–employee information. Further, the fact that we needed to include employee perceptions of the offered HRM practices to measure HRM implementation, and that this information is ideally collected after data on LMX are collected, required employee responses at two different times. As a consequence of these constraints, our final sample was limited to 75 employees and the 20 line managers from their teams. Although this is a rather small sample, we believe that we have benefitted from having matched multilevel data collected in two phases.

Third, although we collected data at two points in time, the analysis still involved cross-sectional data and therefore we cannot confidently attribute causality in the observed relationships. In particularly, the direction of the relationship between LMX and employees’ perceptions of HRM is open to debate. There is literature that clearly advocates an effect of LMX on HRM perceptions, and not the other way around, such that it initially seems less likely that employees’ perceptions of HRM influence LMX. However, we could easily argue that the perceptions that employees have of HRM practices influence how they experience the support they get from the organization. This would mean that HRM perceptions influence POS, a relationship identified by Gavino, Wayne and Erdogan (2012) and others.
A final concern relates to our sample. Our respondents were drawn from a single organization, and tended to be very similar in terms of demographics: the majority of our respondents were male and aged around 50 (average age of employees = 48; average age of line managers = 50). At the same time, one should not forget that engineering contexts are usually dominated by male employees and that our data seems to reflect what is becoming an aging workforce. Nevertheless, future studies should be careful with generalizing our results due to the specific nature of the sample.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, our study provides important insights. Notably, we have shown clear relationships between the extent to which employees perceive the presence of HRM practices and social exchanges within the organization, and not only those between line managers and employees but also those between line managers and the organization as represented by its HR department. As such, our study, by examining the relationships among HRM actors, highlights that, to implement HRM practices, employees need, through their relationship with their line manager, to perceive HRM practices as being present. Given this outcome, we would urge future studies to look deeper into how relationships among HRM actors develop and how these players jointly implement HRM practices.
References


FIGURE 1

LMs' perceptions of HRM support (H1a)

LMs' perceptions of capacity (H1b)

LMs' motivation to implement HRM practices

Employees' perceptions of LMX (H3)

Employees' perceptions of the presence of HRM practices

Employees' affective commitment (H4)

Line management level

Employee level
### TABLE 1

**Means, standard deviations and correlations among the study variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team-level manager variables (N = 20)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Manager age</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Manager tenure</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ability</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>4. Capacity</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Support</td>
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<td>-.33</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Motivation</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.54*</td>
<td>.56*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual-level employee variables (N = 75)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Employee age</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Employee tenure</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Employee contract</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
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<td>4. LMX</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
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<td>-.03</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.39**</td>
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</table>

* p < .01; * p < .05
## TABLE 2

Multiple regression analysis for line manager motivation to implement HRM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>Manager age</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager tenure</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to implement HRM</td>
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<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to implement HRM</td>
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<td>.53**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for implementing HRM</td>
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<td>.66***</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model F</th>
<th>6.02</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F Change</td>
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<td>5.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$N = 20$ line managers, standardized coefficients are shown

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$
### TABLE 3

Hierarchical linear analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level and variables</th>
<th>Employee Perceptions of the Presence of HRM Practices</th>
<th>Affective Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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</tr>
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<td><strong>Level 1: Employee variables</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Employee age</td>
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<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee tenure</td>
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<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee contract</td>
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<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader-member exchange</td>
<td></td>
<td>.23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee perceptions of HRM</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Level 2: Manager variables</strong></td>
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<td>Manager age</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager tenure</td>
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<td>.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to implement HRM</td>
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<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to implement HRM</td>
<td></td>
<td>.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pseudo R²</strong>(^a)</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{***} p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05\)

For Level 1, N = 75; for Level 2, N = 20.

\(^a\) The Pseudo R² values for HRM service value were calculated using the formula suggested by Krefl and De Leeuw (1998)