
Introduction

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Biographical notes: Huub Ruël is a Professor of International Business at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands. One of his research interests is international and cross-cultural e-HRM. He published extensively on e-HRM in general but started move his focus to international business and management from 2008 on and applied an international perspective to e-HRM.

Tanya Bondarouk is an Associate Professor of Human Resource Management at the University of Twente, the Netherlands. She serves as the Associate Editor of the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* and as the co-editor of the *Advanced Series in Management*. Since 2002 she has been busy with the research area of Electronic HRM, and has edited a number of special issues in international journals on this topic. Her main publications concern an integration of Human Resource Management and social aspects of Information Technology Implementations. Her research covers both private and public sectors and deals with a variety of areas such as the implementation of e-HRM, management of HR-IT change, HRM contribution to IT projects, roles of line managers in e-HRM, implementation of HR Shared Service Centres.

Today's global economy is 'addicted' to information technology. Within organisations and across organisations, information technology-based applications and solutions provide 'life lines' to facilitate communication and collaboration. All functional areas in management are affected, including Human Resource Management (HRM).

Since the end of the 1990s, the internet has been the major facilitator for doing business, and electronic business (e-business) has taken off. Currently, the social media-wave, activated on all kinds and sizes of devices as conveniently as we could wish, is taking hold of the international business professionals.

HRM and e-business merged into e-HRM, which is defined as “an umbrella term covering all possible integration mechanisms and contents between Human Resource Management and Information Technologies aiming at creating value within and across organisations for targeted employees and management” (Bondarouk and Ruël, 2009, p.507).

Research on the intersection between Human Resource Management and Information Technology has a history of about four decades (Bondarouk and Furtmueller, 2012). It grew slowly but steadily until the beginning of the 21st century when Electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM) research started to grow extensively. Especially in the past decade there has been a sharp rise in special issues on e-HRM in several journals, a clear indicator that the interest in e-HRM research is apparent and that there is a substantial group of researchers focusing on it.

Yet despite this evident interest in e-HRM research, the field is not nearing saturation at all. On the contrary, there is a lot more work to do, and the research challenges seem almost endless. One of the more serious ones involves internationalising e-HRM research. Most e-HRM research has a national focus or takes the firm, employee or manager as the level of analysis (Ruël and Bondarouk, 2012). This is a serious issue and ‘gap’ in e-HRM research.

An analysis of the e-HRM research literature revealed four distinct groups of publications on e-HRM in an international context: (1) e-HRM studies with a cross-continental focus; (2) ones with a cross-national focus but limited to one continent; (3) ones with a cross-national focus but within one company; and (4) ones within a specifically mentioned national context (Ruël and Bondarouk, 2012). A fifth category can be added, namely e-HRM studies with a cross-continental focus but within one company.

This special issue intends to stimulate e-HRM research with an international perspective and aims to contribute to the field by presenting six articles that all deal with this theme.

Why is e-HRM research with an international perspective important? Within today’s global economy, bigger and smaller multinational corporations (MNC) from developed economies and emerging economies play a major role. In their attempts to run HRM efficiently and effectively, e-HRM is a core channel to provide managerial and non-managerial employees with HR services and to transform HRM into a strategic focus area. But the multinational characteristic of MNCs brings in issues of institutional contexts and national cultural differences. Research into these issues is needed to help understand, explain and improve.

Furthermore, both HRM and IT are not culturally neutral – many of the currently dominant HRM insights and knowledge are based on empirical data in developed economies, mostly Western economies. The field of international HRM is growing, and while HR research from and focusing on emerging economies is growing rapidly, it has not yet resulted in new leading paradigms, theories and models. The same can be said about IT research: much of what is known and what are considered leading concepts, methodologies on IT development and implementation are based on empirical data from mostly developed economies.

The fact that HRM and IT are culturally biased can be assumed to be one of the causes of the problematic implementation of e-HRM and HRIS systems across all international units of MNCs and underutilised usage in a non-Western context.

But again, while anecdotal stories may confirm this assumption, there is a lack of empirical research that provides in-depth insights into how e-HRM works in multinational settings and that aims to advance theories.

This special issue offers a set of six articles that are all great examples of e-HRM in an international context. Interestingly though, five articles take the MNC as the research context, and one takes a specific national context perspective. Only one article of the six uses the concept of national culture, but not as its core focus.

The first article by Van Geffen, Ruël, and Bondarouk (*E-HRM in MNCs: what can be learned from a review of the IS literature?*) offers an introduction to the special issue with a provocative undertone as it starts from the assumption that the information systems (IS) literature is far ahead of e-HRM research when it comes to applying an international perspective. The authors carried out a literature review on IS research that focuses on MNCs and present an analysis of the selected publications based on a self-constructed framework. Comparing the results with international e-HRM research leads to the striking conclusion that indeed e-HRM research is lacking behind and can learn a lot from the IS in MNCs literature.

The second article by Garavan and O'Brien (*Manager Self-Service (MSS) HR portals: the influence of attitudinal, normative, behavioural and national culture factors on their use in an MNC*) presents an empirical quantitative study within the context of the MNC. Managers from India, The Netherlands and Ireland in one and the same MNC and their usage of a mandatory self-service HR portal are the focus of this study. One of the findings is that national cultural factors seem to have some influence on a manager's subjective norms and behavioural intentions.

The third article by Tate, Furtmueller, and Wilderom (*Localising versus standardising electronic human resource management: complexities and tensions between HRM and IT departments*) takes a MNC perspective as well, but focuses on the local site level. The authors present an empirical qualitative study on one of the main debates in MNC research, global integration versus local responsiveness. This study provides an in-depth view on how a global e-HRM system implementation in a MNC, which was called a *success*, resulted in unexpected and even negative outcomes at the local site level.

The fourth article by Burbach and Royle (*Levels of e-HRM adoption in subsidiaries of a US multinational corporation: the mediating role of power, politics and institutions*) presents a study on the mediating role of power and politics on the levels of e-HRM utilisation in the German and Irish subsidiaries of a US-based MNC. This empirical qualitative study finds that particularly resource power derived from strategic capabilities may be employed by subsidiary actors to shape the manner in which e-HRM is utilised.

With the fifth article (*Facing e-HRM: the consequences on employee attitude towards the organisation and the HR department in Italian SMEs*) this special issue turns to e-HRM in a specific national context. The authors, Bissola and Imperatori, address the role of the Italian context in which small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operate and e-HRM is adopted. The results of their large-scale survey among young employees working in SMEs show that operational e-HRM practices seem to enhance the perceived internal efficiency of the HR department, but do not have an impact on employee organisational commitment.

The sixth and final article (*Exploring and comparing HR shared services in subsidiaries of multinational corporations and indigenous organisations in the Netherlands: a strategic response analysis*) shifts the focus to a sub-area within e-HRM

research, namely HR shared services (HR SSCs). The authors, Meijerink, Bondarouk, and Maatman, present a study that contributes to the standardisation–localisation debate. The key question it addresses is whether the HR activities and governance structures of HR SSCs of MNC subsidiaries differ from those of indigenous organisations and how any differences can be explained. An in-depth analysis of the HR SSCs of 18 Dutch MNCs did find significant differences and uncovered the strategic responses to institutional pressures as an explanation for these differences.

We are very thankful to the reviewers for their time, efforts, and input that helped the authors to revise and improve their work. This special issue hopefully serves its purpose and will stimulate more research on e-HRM in an international context.

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