

CALL FOR PAPERS

***The 10th International Critical Management Conference
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Stream:

HRM: Powerful Player or Powerless Heretic?

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Since its emergence, the U.S.-focused conceptualization of human resource management (HRM) has emphasized the need to align HRM activities with organizational strategy. Strategic HRM, however, is not only about aligning HRM practices with the organization's strategic goals; it is also concerned with the strategic role and strategic behaviour of practitioners working within the HR department (e.g., Armstrong, 2011; Boxall & Purcell, 2008; Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1988). Strategic integration in this respect involves HR specialists being integrated into the organization's strategic planning activities and being part of powerful groups, setting the long-term direction for the organization (Brandl, Reichel, & Mayrhofer, 2008; Brewster & Larsen, 1992). In order for HRM alignment with organizational strategy to be successful, members of the HR department need to have the authority to gain access to strategic decision-making processes, or – as stressed by emergent views on strategy – be able to influence strategic decisions informally.

Despite the obvious connection between issues of power and the HR department's involvement in strategic decision-making, HRM scholars rarely engage in such discussions. The literature revolves primarily around issues of vertical and horizontal fit between organizational and HRM strategy, and between HRM strategy and HRM practices respectively, culminating in a discussion of firm performance outcomes (Paauwe & Boon, 2009).

While the strategic HRM field rarely uses the term 'power', there appears to be an implicit assumption of power being embedded in HR departments, which allows them to participate in shaping organizational (HRM) strategies. Yet there is another group of scholars that severely questions the authority and influence of the HR department in organizations. Very soon after the emergence of 'HRM', critical voices were raised about this (alleged) new concept. Their critique centered (and remains) on the notion that powerful HR practitioners who have a 'seat at the table' and influence strategic decisions are rather the exception than the rule (Hammonds, 2005). There is a clear gap between the rhetoric around the essential role of HRM for delivering 'resourceful' humans and the reality that HR departments face, especially in terms of strategic contribution. Despite the centrality assigned to HRM activities (in rhetoric at least), HR departments often experience marginality in practice (Gowler & Legge, 1984; Noon, 1992) and have been reported to be among the lowest status departments holding the least power in organizations (Guest & King, 2004; Kelly & Gennard,

2001). It might be argued that HRM allegedly acts against its own objective interests; a phenomenon labelled as 'power as domination' (Fleming and Spicer, 2007), based on the relationship between the social field and habitus, the construction of HRM and its preferences in relation to the ongoing production of power (Akram, Emerson, & Marsh, 2015).

The landscape of these two camps, however, largely rests on *assumptions* of either powerful players or powerless heretics because theoretically-sound empirical studies of HR departments' and HR practitioners' power are scarce. Especially given that the HR department – due to the resources it is specialized in – might be different from other organizational functions, general theories on subunit, positional and personal power and findings related to other organizational functions might not be directly transferable. This is mainly because of human resources differing greatly from most other resources (Collings & Wood, 2009), i.e. human beings have a variety of needs and motives for being productive in the workplace. Motivation, learning, and health needs, for example, make people less predictable and more complex to manage than other – especially tangible – resources.

In many countries, personnel management's history started as welfare work, clearly stressing the human side of HRM (Kaufman, 2007). With the emergence of HRM, however, performance (rather than welfare) gained dominance. According to the prevalent shareholder orientation in the U.S. where the notion of HRM originated, the only way for the HR department to gain legitimacy was to prove an ability to influence organizational performance directly and positively. The contrast between the welfare and performance orientations manifests itself as role ambiguity (Foote & Robinson, 1999; Thurley, 1981).

While mainstream scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s attempted to prove empirically the influence of best HRM practices, best bundles of HRM practices, or the fit between HRM practices and contingencies on organizational performance, there are others who plead for a social science (Watson, 2010) or a socially-embedded perspective (Kochan, 2007) that emphasizes advocating the social contract between employees and employer. Given that many attempts to show the impact of HRM on performance were unsuccessful (Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, & Allen, 2005); there may be other ways for HRM to gain legitimacy and power. The development of the idea that HRM may be understood as a discourse and a set of practices – with reference to Foucault (1982) – could be fruitful in this respect (Townley, 1993). Furthermore, a Bourdieu-inspired perspective on HRM as a field-within-fields (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008) could be helpful to explore the HR department's relative position in the social space, and especially its position within the field of power (Bourdieu, 1996).

While research on HRM and power is generally scarce, there are even fewer studies that consider recent developments related to power discussing the internal and external context or HR-specific developments. Contextual developments include new forms of organizing summed up in the term 'post-bureaucracy' (Heckscher, 1994): the need for empowered, functionally-flexible and multi-skilled employees, who are able to deal with a high degree of uncertainty, and organizations that show blurred boundaries, making heavy use of peripheral work and outsourcing (Johnson, 2009). The permeation of our lives by technology, possibly the most influential and fastest trend in recent years, has added significantly to the palette of imaginable ways of working. Crowdwork, as a form of digital outsourcing that can be used for tasks ranging from repetitive to highly innovative, further adds to delimitation, fragmentation and flexibility for requestors and workers (Ellmer, 2015). For such post-bureaucratic scenarios, we do not yet understand whether traditional power relations are reproduced or are fundamentally different, and if potential changes lead to an

increase or decrease in the HR department's legitimacy. Recent research in other areas shows that practice theory is capable of explaining such dynamics (Bjerregaard & Klitmoller, 2016), showing how actors "interact with, construct and draw upon the social and physical features of context in the everyday activities that constitute practice" (Jarzabkowski, Matthiesen, & Van de Ven, Andrew, p. 288).

The rise of technology also enables the HR-specific trend of digital HRM: the conscious and directed support of or the full use of web-technology-based channels for implementing HRM strategies, policies and practices (Ruel, Bondarouk, & van der Vald, 2006). There are some initial indications that HR department power and the use of electronic HRM are positively related (Parry, 2011) but the mechanisms behind this relationship are unclear.

Another HR-specific trend is the – especially among practitioners – very popular HR service delivery framework in which the HR function is organized as business partners, shared service centers and centers of excellence. Since a role as a strategic partner forms part of this 'three legged stool model', positive power impact seems to be pre-programmed, however, Wright (2008) shows that the positive relationship between having HR business partners and power is more complex than this. It might not be HR as a function that benefits from potential positive power effects because these business partners seem not to associate themselves as HR people.

Finally, a trend that in part seems to counter most of these developments is the growing popularity of sustainability. Sustainable HRM represents the social dimension of sustainability (Ehnert, 2008) and, thus, offers a way to gain legitimacy by not obeying the shareholder value orientation, but instead focusing on the social contract between employee and employer.

Against this general backdrop, we invite papers that address pertinent questions with respect to the power of the HR department. We are especially interested in three areas of questions:

- What role does the HR department play in the organisations' 'orchestra'? How powerful/powerless, dominating/dominated, or orthodox/heretic are HR departments vis-à-vis other functional departments?
- How do HR managers deal with their role ambiguity? Do they focus on the business case or do they concentrate on arguments derived from a socially-embedded perspective? What consequences arise for their relative power within the organisation?
- What are the consequences for the HR department arising from new forms of work and employment and HR specific trends? Do they lead to more or less power within the organisation?

These examples are not exhaustive, and we also welcome empirical papers based on novel or sound theoretical bases demonstrating a strong link between theory and empirical work on this theme.

Submission instructions: Abstracts (minimum 500 words, maximum 1000 words [without references and tables], A4 paper, single spaced, 12point font) should be submitted to astrid.reichel@sbg.ac.at AND thomas.schneidhofer@uni-seeburg.at by January, 31st 2017.

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