

GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: BRINGING THE KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE INTO HRM

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In this introduction to this Special Issue, we briefly describe the knowledge perspective that has emerged in management research over the last two decades, discuss its current and potential future relations to Human Resources Management (HRM) research, and summarize the papers in this issue.

The Knowledge Perspective

Knowledge—in various forms, at different levels, and as both dependent and independent variables—has become a central construct in a broad range of management research fields (Grandori & Kogut, 2002). From an epistemological standpoint, researchers have explored and debated the philosophical foundations of knowledge, its nature and scope, its form and function (e.g., Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1958). From an applied standpoint, researchers have built on this work to examine how knowledge is acquired, shared, renewed, and integrated within and between organizations (e.g., Hansen, 1999; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004). They have explored the various levels at which knowledge can exist, notably at the individual and organizational levels (Felin & Hesterly, 2007), and also in epistemic communities and communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001).

The term *knowledge management* has become ubiquitous in organizational research and has served as a foundation for both theoretical and empirical advances in major management fields, such as organization theory, strategic management, international business, innovation, technology management, and organizational

behavior. Fundamental conceptualizations and analytical approaches (e.g., the “knowledge-based view of the firm,” Grant, 1996; Nickerson & Zenger, 2004; Spender, 1996); new constructs (capabilities, whether “dynamic” or not; competencies, routines, knowledge sharing, knowledge integration, absorptive capacity, etc.); new dimensionalizations (e.g., Winter’s, 1987, dimensions of knowledge assets); and new measures (e.g., of tacit versus explicit knowledge, Hansen, 1999) all derive from the premise that understanding knowledge is a crucial aspect of organizational behavior and performance (e.g., Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). Eisenhardt and Santos (2002) talk about a “knowledge movement” to capture the strong expansion of the use of the knowledge construct in management research, and we argue this movement is as important, even revolutionary, to management research as the behavioral approach of the 1950s (Foss, 2009).

HRM and the Knowledge Perspective

Not surprisingly, the link between HRM and knowledge is a logical extension of these lines of research (cf. Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). Because HRM is fundamentally concerned with managing human capital, it focuses on all firms’ basic knowledge asset. For

example, recruitment, selection, placement, and retention mechanisms are fundamental aspects of building and maintaining stocks of knowledge that firms can deploy to enhance performance and perhaps gain competitive advantages. Similarly, human resource (HR) practices such as training, job design, performance feedback, career development, and the like, all prove instrumental for enhancing the flow of knowledge—that is, its acquisition, transfer, and integration within the organization (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Minbaeva, Pedersen, Björkman, Fey, & Park, 2003).

More recently, the interest in human capital architectures (cf. Lepak & Snell, 1999) reflects a strategic interest in firm-level knowledge constructs as a basis for capability enhancement, competitive differentiation, and value creation (Barney, 1991; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). In fact, integrative work in the intersection between the resource-based view and HRM is not a new undertaking (Boxall, 1996). Increasingly, this work has extended beyond the sole emphasis on human capital to include the knowledge-based implications of social capital and relational architectures (cf. Kang & Snell, 2009; Leanna & Van Buren III, 1999) as well as organizational capital and innovation (Youndt, Subramaniam, & Snell, 2004).

This research may provide a much-needed linchpin between strategic management and HRM. The foundations of firm-level knowledge constructs, such as capabilities or competencies, may rest in more macroperspectives of HRM that address how knowledge is sourced, shared, combined, and integrated. There is also a link between strategic management and microperspectives of HRM. For example, a key issue in strategic management is appropriation—that is, who will actually appropriate the returns from a strategy. Firms do not appropriate; individuals do (Coff, 1999). Individual appropriation is influenced by bargaining power, which, in turn, is influenced by the value, specificity, and outside options of human capital. Increasingly, strategic management scholars also emphasize the need to bridge macro- and microperspectives (Felin & Foss,

2005; Teece, 2007). For example, they have increasingly directed attention to understanding the composition and emergence of capabilities (e.g., Teece, 2007). Hiring, deploying, and training human capital are surely important aspects of building and leveraging capabilities. Sourcing, sharing, combining, and integrating knowledge are processes that increase firm-level capabilities or competencies; to the extent that HRM matters to these processes, it also matters to firm-level knowledge constructs. In sum, the knowledge perspective and HRM seem to be highly complementary perspectives; integrating them should be high on the research agenda.

Research Challenges

Although knowledge-based perspectives have influenced the HRM field and the potential for cross-fertilization is huge, we argue that the absorption and application of this thinking are only in their infancy. Most research still does not explicitly consider the new challenges HRM faces in its role in influencing knowledge processes. However, there is reason to be optimistic looking forward.

First, a few studies linking the strategic HRM field and knowledge perspective have recognized that the traditional prescriptions of high-performance HRM practices are not relevant for knowledge processes. The widely accepted axiom in the HRM-performance literature—the more HRM practices a firm employs, the better it performs—may not apply to the HRM-knowledge-performance link (Minbaeva, 2008). Hence, one should not simply accept findings from the previous HRM literature and (business) performance and substitute the performance variable with something knowledge-related. To advance the field, we should define the HRM practices relevant for knowledge processes *theoretically*. Yet, even if we define the nature of HRM practices, it is still unclear what role they play in linking knowledge to performance. For example, we may hypothesize HRM practices to be antecedents to knowledge. After all, recruitment and training influence the attraction and improvement of

human capital. On the other hand, we may also think of HRM as moderating or mediating the link from knowledge to performance. Thus, performance assessment, job design, reward systems, and so on, call forth and deploy human capital services.

Second, although HRM and knowledge processes may stand in a causal relation, the relevant linking mechanisms are only incompletely understood (Foss & Minbaeva, 2009). HRM researchers need to look deeper than constructs such as human capital pools and HRM architectures and examine more fine-grained causal links between HRM practices and knowledge processes. Although the metaphor of the "black box" is perhaps overused, in this case it seems directly applicable; a good deal more work needs to be done to uncover the underlying mechanisms by which HR practices influence the development of knowledge. Such research might take motivational diversity more fully into account: Employees differ in their extrinsic and/or intrinsic motivation, for example, to share knowledge. Moreover, applying HRM instruments may lead to subtle motivational dynamics; for example, perhaps applying more bonus reward systems may harm the intrinsic motivation to share knowledge.

As theoretical work sheds light on the causal connections between HRM and knowledge processes, a better foundation for *empirical* work on it will emerge. In all likelihood, this may require more novel approaches to research. The current predominance of qualitative over quantitative research methods is—at least in this specific case—an indication that important constructs and the causal relations that link them are still unclear. Small N qualitative research is particularly valuable for inductive inquiry and theory development, or in identifying hitherto neglected factors and relations that later in the scientific inquiry may be theorized as variables and mechanisms (e.g., as Swart & Kinnie [2003] did). The approach is also justified when the aim is to engage in a dialogue with existing theory to ascertain which of a multitude of candidate variables and mechanisms are relevant (cf. Currie & Kerrin, 2003). We observe a prevalence of this kind of empirical

research on HRM knowledge exactly because of a lack of theorizing on the issue.

Third, the focus of the existing limited empirical research has been divergent, and rewards and training have attracted disproportionate attention. To be sure, these are important HRM practices, but it is hard to argue on a priori grounds that the positive impact of rewards and training on knowledge processes should be higher than the impact of, for example, job design variables. In fact, we know very little about how job design variables influence knowledge sharing and integration, although there are strong *prima facie* grounds for suspecting that there is an influence (see Foss, Minbaeva, Pedersen, & Reinholt, in press). Clearly, a wider range of HRM practices needs to be analyzed.

Meeting Research Challenges: This Special Issue

This Special Issue addresses the interaction of strategic HRM practices and knowledge processes in firms and specifically tackles the above-defined limitations. We called for submissions that (1) theoretically discuss why HRM matters for knowledge processes by addressing the microfoundations of the link between HRM and knowledge processes (such as motivation and cognition), (2) provide empirical evidence of the impact of HRM practices on various outcomes of knowledge processes, and (3) bridge a gap between theory and practice by offering practical solutions for managers who have an interest in managing knowledge processes.

The first two articles investigate the basic premise that organizations adopting particular HRM practices should expect superior performance because these practices positively affect intraorganizational knowledge processes. In the first paper, by Lopez-Cabrales, Pérez-Luño, and Valle Cabrera ("Knowledge as a Mediator Between HRM Practices and Innovative Activity"), the authors bridge several areas of research to develop theoretically and then empirically test the relations among HRM, knowledge, innovative activities, and performance. The main finding is that the uniqueness of employees'

knowledge conditions the contribution of HRM practices to innovative capability and hence performance. Simonin and Özsoymer's paper ("Knowledge Processes and Learning Outcomes in MNCs: An Empirical Investigation of the Role of HRM Practices in Foreign Subsidiaries") focuses on knowledge processes related to market- and marketing-focused knowledge developed by subsidiaries of MNCs (multinational corporations). They found that employing particular HRM practices enhances knowledge transfer outflows from the subsidiary to other parts of the MNC and the subsidiary's performance in its local market. Interestingly, the authors do not consider HRM practices exogenous to the model: They argue that adopting HRM practices conducive to knowledge generation and diffusion is dependent on learning orientation (that is, the MNC's commitment to learning). The third paper keeps the focus on subsidiaries' knowledge outflows. Yamao, De Cieri, and Hutchings ("Transferring Subsidiary Knowledge to Global Headquarters: Subsidiary Senior Executives' Perceptions of the Role of HR Configurations in the Development of Knowledge Stocks") study the role of HRM practices in the development of a subsidiary's knowledge stocks, leading to transfer of knowledge from subsidiaries to headquarters (HQ). The study offers empirical support for the general associations between HRM practices and knowledge processes. The authors' main theoretical contribution lies in synthesizing theories of human capital and social capital with HRM and knowledge transfer. Further, they focus on reverse knowledge transfer (from subsidiaries to HQ), which is an important area of research (since subsidiaries are important knowledge providers) but one that is often neglected.

Research on HRM and knowledge processes is shifting gears and paying more attention to the microfoundations of the link between HRM and knowledge processes. This is not to say that the HRM-knowledge link could not be studied at the collective level. HRM scholars may prefer to use explanatory shorthand in the form of collective concepts if they are convinced that those concepts can be reduced to micromechanisms,

but performing this reduction would not add anything in the explanatory context (cf. Stinchcombe, 1991). This is completely legitimate. However, the *detailed* explanation of how HRM should matter for knowledge processes should nevertheless have a microfoundation.

Several papers in this Special Issue reflect the growing attention to microfoundations. Felin, Zenger, and Tomsik's thought-provoking paper ("The Knowledge Economy: Emerging Organizational Forms, Missing Microfoundations, and Key Considerations for Managing Human Capital") acknowledges HR scholars' contributions emphasizing the more "collective" or "communal" nature of the link between HRM and knowledge processes. However, the authors also emphasize the need for building microfoundations for the HRM-knowledge processes link that are rooted in individual behaviors, knowledge, motivations, and preferences, and therefore also in individual heterogeneity. The paper offers numerous implications for researchers and practitioners. Gagné ("A Model of Knowledge-Sharing Motivation") introduces individual-level theories such as the theory of planned behavior and self-determination theory to develop a model of knowledge-sharing motivation. The model endogenously explains that individual knowledge-sharing behavior is determined by individual attitudes, needs, motivations, and intentions. The author then offers empirically testable propositions for how HRM practices affect these individual-level attributes and thereby influence individuals' knowledge-sharing behavior. Mäkelä and Brewster ("Interunit Interaction Contexts, Interpersonal Social Capital, and the Differing Levels of Knowledge Sharing") bring the discussion to the interpersonal level and examine the extent to which four different contexts of interunit interaction are associated with social capital and knowledge sharing. Bringing the concept of social capital into discussions of the microfoundations of the HRM-knowledge processes link is indeed beneficial. This concept is "an aid in accounting for different outcomes at the level of individual actors and an aid toward making the micro-to-macro transitions without elaborating the social

structural details through which this occurs" (Coleman, 1994, p. 101). Kaše, Paauwe, and Zupan ("HR Practices, Interpersonal Relations, and Intrafirm Knowledge Transfer in Knowledge-Intensive Firms: A Social Network Perspective") use the theory of social capital to bridge the social network perspective with literature on HRM and knowledge. This paper's principal contribution stems from theoretically and empirically linking experienced HR practices (as actor-based construct) and interpersonal relations along with intrafirm knowledge transfer (both as relational constructs).

This Special Issue closes with two Leadership Forum articles. Morris and Calamai ("Dynamic HR: Global Applications from IBM") discuss the techniques of Entrepreneurial and Networked HR as practical approaches to developing HR managers' necessary dynamic capabilities. They illustrate the development of these techniques with examples from IBM. Vance, Vaiman, and Andersen ("The Vital Liaison Role of Host Country Nationals in MNC Knowledge Management") argue for the crucial role of host country nationals in intra-MNC knowledge processes.

Future Work on HRM and Knowledge Processes

The contributions in this Special Issue indicate that HRM practices constitute a potentially important part of the organizational antecedents of knowledge processes. Collectively, they suggest that we can ascribe a nonnegligible part of observed variation in knowledge processes to variation in employing HRM practices. The authors also point out the need to identify the underlying mechanisms,

or microfoundations, of the HRM-knowledge link.

Indeed, a number of scholars have recently been critical of conceptualizing knowledge at the macrolevel (the level of the firm) and have called for microfoundations for macroconstructs and macrocausal relations (e.g., Abell, Felin, & Foss, 2008; Felin & Foss, 2005; Felin & Hesterly, 2007, including understanding of interlevel relations; Rothaermel & Hess, 2007). We concur: Scholars should base future research on HRM and knowledge processes on the premise that a deeper understanding of the relationship between HRM practices and knowledge implies theorizing the individuals (Grant, 1996), individual heterogeneity (Felin & Hesterly, 2007), and individual interaction (Felin & Foss, 2005). We take such work to consist of formulating theories about potentially latent mechanisms that can account for variations in knowledge processes at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

Working on this Special Issue revealed challenges associated with empirical research on HRM and knowledge that include common method bias, lack of objective indicators for knowledge processes, and need for multilevel data. Future empirical research should address those topics. We would also like to point out the danger of collapsing various knowledge processes into one performance variable in empirical models. Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), for example, have pointed out the importance of distinguishing between receiving and sending knowledge. These two rather different behaviors have different underlying micromechanisms, such as motivations (cf. Foss et al., in press).

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