INTRODUCTION

Connecting human resources management and knowledge management

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Abstract

Purpose – The article seeks to demonstrate the benefits of using an integrative approach between human resource management (HRM) and knowledge management (KM), where one reinforces and supports the other in enhancing organisational effectiveness and performance.

Design/methodology/approach – This contribution is a collection of research articles that explore how HRM and KM are interrelated and provide empirical support for such connection.

Findings – The authors firmly believe that the articles of this issue will not only provide for interesting and worthwhile reading material, but also set the stage for enlarging and enriching the research base on the relationship between HRM and KM.

Research limitations/implications – It is not an exhaustive analysis of the connections between HRM and KM; however, it is a very good first step in that direction. Even though HRM and KM have much in common, there are few studies that make such a connection explicit.

Practical implications – The article provides a very useful source of information and practical advice on how the connection between the two disciplines can enhance organisational functioning.

Originality/value – This special issue fulfils a gap in the existing literature for both academics and practitioners on the merits of using HRM and KM integratively.

Keywords Human resource management, Knowledge management
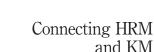
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Introduction

In this issue of the *International Journal of Manpower* we try to demonstrate the interface between human resource management (HRM) and knowledge management (KM) and the benefits of using an integrative approach between the two disciplines having the employee at the centre. While HRM, KM, and similar disciplines, such as management of intellectual capital and information management, address the issues of increasing the role of knowledge in contemporary organisations and the economy from different angles, it is felt that combining these angles into an integrative approach could be more fruitful.

This belief has been recently put forward and empirically verified by various authors. To illustrate, Scarbrough (2003) found that the innovation process could be facilitated if HRM and KM are linked within organisations. Furthermore, Scholl *et al.* (2004) explain that the most effective approach to the theoretical and empirical issues of KM would be an interdisciplinary and a multi-disciplinary one. According to their

research, the most pressing and challenging practical problem for the understanding and advancement of KM is to give priority to human factors. In a similar fashion, Oltra (2005) criticises academics for not taking rigorous and systematic steps toward comprehensive theory building in linking KM and HRM. Finally, Yahya and Goh (2002) argue that:

The focus of KM should rightly be placed on humans themselves, and the impact made by human resource management on KM practices . . . and that KM is actually an evolved form of human resource management . . .

To address the aforementioned arguments, we have organised an international conference held in Ljubljana in June 2004 and titled HRM in the knowledge-based economy. The main idea of the conference was to explore the question on how HRM does, could and should contribute to knowledge-based organisations and the economy. The implicit assumption was that HRM and KM should come closer together. We used three articles from that conference, for this special issue. In addition, we recruited four additional ones through an open call in order to provide a wider array of studies to this link between HRM and KM.

These articles are primarily empirical, each focusing on a different aspect of HRM and KM. Their conceptualisations, methods and findings demonstrate the importance of an interdisciplinary approach. Therefore, before providing an overview of each paper, we will first put forward some considerations regarding each as well as the interfaces between the two managerial disciplines, HRM and KM.

Human resource management

Strait forward definitions of human resource management are difficult to find. A typical handbook usually defines HRM as the management of the organisation's employees (Scarpello and Ledvinka, 1988, p. 4). Armstrong (2000) defines HRM as strategic personnel management emphasising the acquisition, organisation and motivation of human resources. Beardwell and Holden (2001, pp. 9-16) hold that understanding HRM depends highly on the perspective taken: HRM could be conceived as traditional personnel management, as a fusion of personnel management and industrial relations, as a resource-based employment relationship or as a part of strategic managerial function. With respect to this, HRM involves managing employees, their interpersonal relations and relations with the organisation.

Perhaps the most crucial point about HRM is that people and their interpersonal relations become and are treated as resources, something that could be considered both good and bad: the negative side is that recourses are often treated as expendable; we promote the positive side, that recourses are valuable and necessary for an organisation to become exceptional. In line with the resource-based view (Penrose, 1959) employees with all their capacities become desirable and real resources for the organisation if they are to a high degree: valuable and scarce, inimitable, non-substitutable and appropriable (Boxall and Purcell, 2003, p. 75). Boxall and Purcell continue that:

Firms have the possibility of generating human capital advantage through recruiting and retaining outstanding people: through "capturing" a stock of exceptional human talent, latent with powerful forms of "tacit" knowledge. Organisational process advantage, on the other hand, may be understood as a function of historically evolved, socially complex, causally

ambiguous processes, such as team-based learning and cross-functional cooperation – processes which are very difficult to imitate . . . In a nutshell, "human resource advantage" . . . can be traced to better people in organisations with better process (Boxall and Purcell, 2003, pp. 85-86).

There are two points to remember: first, HRM does not manage people as such, but their personal and interpersonal (inter-group, organisational) characteristics, which could be considered resources and create organisational advantages; and second, human resources are not only brought into the organisation by means of recruitment and selection but also developed within the organisation by investment in their personal capacities and deployed by nurturing of interpersonal and inter-group relations.

Another important point for our discussion is how human resources are composed; what is their structure and how it is changing? According to O'Donnell *et al.* (2003), people are evaluated through their competencies, knowledge, know-how, adaptability, network connections and experiences. Among these components, knowledge has become most accentuated: according to Drucker (1999), the basic economic resource is no longer capital, natural resources or labour, but knowledge. What really distinguishes work results from each other is the share of embedded knowledge (Burton, 1999, p. 4). In their study of the Irish ICT sector O'Donnell *et al.* (2003) found that approximately two thirds of organisational value is perceived to be composed of intellectual capital and that over half of this capital stems directly from people working, thinking and communicating.

Knowledge management
Unlike human resource management, which is seldom explicitly defined, a bundle of definitions of knowledge exist. However, like human resource management, definitions of knowledge and how to manage it, are usually incomplete because they deal with a rather slippery subject (Winter, 1987). Furthermore, no universally accepted foundation for knowledge has yet been developed (Barabas, 1990, p. 61). Perhaps the most profound distinction in the study of knowledge has been made between knowledge as a subjective state in individuals' minds embedded in organisations and communities – constructivist approach (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p. 5; Lang, 2001), and knowledge as an objective state of things – objectivist approach (Spender, 1998). This distinction coincides to some extent with that made between tacit and explicit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka, 2002), soft and hard knowledge (Hildreth *et al.*, 1999), background and foreground knowledge (Bhatt, 2001).

The proponents of the second view would argue that knowledge management is a conscious strategy of getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time and helping people share and put information into action in ways that strive to improve organisational performance (O'Dell and Jackson, 1998, p. 4). Knowledge is a commodity to be traded (Gibbons *et al.*, 2000) and needs to be managed (Dodgson, 2000, p. 37).

The proponents of the first view rely on the difference between information and knowledge. According to Bhatt (2001) knowledge is different from data and information. Data are raw facts and when organised they become information. Knowledge is meaningful information. They claim that "the most important parts of knowledge cannot be handled as a thing for others" (Scholl *et al.*, 2004). Rooney and

Schneider (2005) explain that knowledge is bound to human consciousness while data, texts and images are contained in storage media. In a similar fashion, Kakabadse *et al.* (2003) argue that:

> KM is not about managing knowledge but about changing entire business cultures and strategies of organisations to ones that value learning and sharing. Although some aspects of knowledge, such as culture, organisational structure, communication process and information can be managed, knowledge itself, arguably, cannot ... Hence, one can manage or support processes of learning rather than managing knowledge.

Finally, Rooney and Schneider (2005, p. 33) are explicit that "because knowledge is sensitive to context and is fallibly enacted, it cannot be managed".

The constructivist approach accepts not only individual knowledge but also for knowledge that exists in the social context of groups, organisations and societies (Yahya and Goh, 2002). While knowledge is created by and rests in individual employees, it is also created through social interaction and is embedded in the social structure of organisational members (Narasimha, 2000). According to Davenport and Prusak (1998) knowledge in organisations often becomes embedded not only in documents and repositories, but also in organisational routines, processes, practices and norms. As Malhotra (1998) states KM "embodies organisational processes that seek synergistic combination of data and information processing capacity of information technologies, and the creative and innovative capacity of human beings". This means that the distinction made between knowledge as a thing and knowledge as a state of mind cannot be conceived in terms of "either or".

In our view they complement each other. Objective knowledge encoded in written, electronic and other forms has helped enormously in functioning of the existing educational systems, which strive for the transfer of knowledge to the new generations. A well-structured textbook keeps its value even in a modern study process. The same stands for the production systems, which use written plans, designs, manuals etc. However, to make encoded knowledge available to individuals and organisations and to create additional knowledge on this basis, human touch is unavoidable. They must read, listen and speak in order to reach a new level of comprehension. Only this way a new piece of knowledge could become encoded.

If knowledge does not exist and cannot be observed and managed in its pure form, the concept of knowledge embeddedness deserves special attention. According to Blacker (2002, pp. 48-50) knowledge could be embedded in several ways: embrained in terms of conceptual skills and cognitive abilities; embodied in terms of being action oriented, situational and only partially explicit, linked to individuals' senses and physical abilities; encultured in terms of shared understandings achieved in the process of socialisation and acculturation; embedded in systemic routines that include relationships between technologies, roles, formal procedures and emergent routines; and encoded in terms of information conveyed by signs and symbols in books, manuals, codes of practice and electronic media.

Ingrained into the process of KM is the so-called knowledge cycle. This cycle integrates knowledge through four main phases, which should be observed interactively rather than by a linear approach (OECD, 2001): the first is knowledge acquisition, which focuses primarily on searching among various sources of information and knowledge, on their selection, and on ways to bring the existing knowledge in the possession of individuals and organisations; the second involves

knowledge creation, which focuses on the development and increasing bulk of new knowledge; the third is knowledge transfer, distribution, dissemination and sharing, aiming for relevant knowledge to reach relevant individuals, groups and organisations as soon as possible; and the fourth entails knowledge utilisation and application in various environments, which is the ultimate goal of the economic organisations and systems as well as individuals who work for them.

Where HRM and KM meet

If we compare the enumerated characteristics of HRM and KM as described above, the following observations could be made: If HRM is about managing people effectively and if people's most valuable resource is knowledge, then HRM and KM come closely interrelated. Even more, HRM and KM share common activities and goals when creating work units, teams, cross-functional cooperation, as well as communication flows and networks inside the organisation and across its borders.

If we compare the KM cycle with HRM processes, we will find the various activities shared between KM and HRM. Knowledge acquisition is about recruiting outstanding people and about helping them learn and grow as individuals and as professionals. It is also about encouraging employees to participate in professional networks and communities of practice that extend beyond organisational boundaries (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Knowledge creation is achieved by creating a supportive environment, through requisite HRM, for individuals, groups and teams in order to be challenged by the organisational problems, to search for the problems' solutions and to innovate. It goes from the creation of positions and teams, to the provision of information feedback flows, to the design of stimulating remuneration and other systems of encouragement. It includes also investment in the training and development of human resources. Knowledge transfer concerns various forms of learning, the creation of a knowledge sharing climate, establishment of training units which assess and analyse training needs, provide and evaluate training, and lead towards learning organisations (Senge, 1994). Finally, knowledge utilisation is about the deployment of human resources by means of proper leadership, division of tasks and responsibilities, remuneration systems, and performance appraisal.

It would be difficult to find an area where HRM and KM do not meet. Perhaps one such area could be management of the encoded knowledge, although one could argue that this is not a KM but an information management issue. It seems, however, that encoding knowledge and putting it in an explicit form could go beyond sheer information management. Furthermore, codification is usually associated with the process of abstraction, which should provide for effective diffusion (Boisot, 2005, pp. 178-190). Thus, managing knowledge and managing human resources, even though not interchangeable concepts, they are certainly highly inter-related. Teece (2000) takes this argument a step further, suggesting that KM is more multifaceted than HRM because it involves managing intellectual property rights and the development and transfer of individual and organisational know-how. Nevertheless, knowledge cannot be managed in a void – without people – and the other way around. Therefore, the two disciplines are not only inter-related but also highly interdependent

By this comparison we propose an integrative approach between KM and HRM, one that will advance knowledge in both fields as well as improve organisational effectiveness. If HRM neglects the requisite management of knowledge and does not

adjust its concepts and practices to the multi-faceted nature of knowledge, it puts itself on a side-track. The same stands for KM if it does not focus on the requisite management of individuals, their interpersonal relations and their relations with their respective organisations. To put it affirmatively:

> The focus of KM should rightly be placed on humans themselves, and the impact made by human resource management on KM practices ... The main tasks of HRM are to monitor, measure and intervene in construction, embodiment, dissemination and use of knowledge of employees (Yahya and Goh, 2002).

Shih and Chiang (2005) have already attempted to provide empirical support for the connection among HRM, KM and corporate strategies and we seek to enrich such support with similar studies through this special issue.

About the articles

Given the aforementioned discussion and without further due, we introduce below the various articles in this special issue (*International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 28 No. 3/4, 2007) that demonstrate the merits of integrating KM and HRM.

The first article, by B.A. Lundvall and P. Nielsen, deals with the establishment of "learning organisations" as a central element of knowledge management – especially among firms operating in markets where product innovation is an important parameter of competition. The authors argue that the wide use of information extends the potential for codifying knowledge but at the same time it makes tacit knowledge scarcer and it contributes to the formation of "a learning economy". They support their argument with an empirical analysis demonstrating that firms that introduce several human resource management practices assumed to characterise the learning organisation are more innovative than the average firm. HRM contributes thus to knowledge creation.

Following the above is an article on measuring organisational learning among employees, by R. Chiva, J. Alegre and R. Lapiedra. In this article, the authors describe the development and validation of a diagnostic tool which aims to capture the organisational propensity to learn, something which as they claim is missing from extant literature. They propose five dimensions that represent the essential factors that determine organisational learning capability: experimentation, risk taking, interaction with the external environment, dialogue, and participation in decisions. This tool may be related to a dynamic training approach applied to organisations or serve as a mechanism to facilitate learning, as the five dimensions may represent a useful target for organisational change initiatives.

In the third article, N. Zupan and R. Kase examine the structural positions of line managers and HR specialists (called "HR actors") within relational networks for creating and sharing knowledge; and explore the implications for designing and implementing HR practices in knowledge-intensive firms (KIF). This is a very interesting article as it demonstrates that line managers who are HR actors are centrally positioned within the knowledge networks examined, while HR specialists are not. These results imply that a decentralised approach to HRM in KIF can be effective. Furthermore, the study shows that HRM can affect the process of knowledge creation and sharing by implementing HR practices through centrally positioned line managers.

In line with the aforementioned articles, but shifting gears a bit towards organisational competitive advantage, the fifth article of this issue deals with the development of a proactive approach to competency modelling and its application to facilitate strategic change by supporting communication, understanding of business goals and the incorporation of new behaviours, roles and competencies within the organisation. M. Vakola, K.E. Soderquist and G.P. Prastacos base their study on the central role that competencies have in integrating the different human resource management activities into a requisite system and the real need to translate business strategy into the people competencies necessary to implement and support that strategy at the operational organisational levels. Through a case study, M. Vakola and her colleagues have demonstrated that their suggested approach was successful in anchoring the competencies in the new organisational strategy, ensuring focus on job-related skills, and allowing for significant flexibility while keeping areas and competencies generic.

Adding to the richness of this special issue, in the next article T.J. Chang and S.P. Yeh explore how knowledge sharing among new product development members of high technology Taiwanese firms is positively related to team-based joint reward systems and organisational citizenship behaviours. They also investigate the mediating effects of perceived procedural justice to the relationship between joint reward systems and organisational citizenship behaviour, thus highlighting the importance of perceived procedural justice in rewarding for organisational citizenship behaviour and in turn exhibiting high new product development performance.

Next, J.G Cegarra-Navarro and E.A. Martinez-Conesa propose a model that examines how knowledge management has an impact on the adoption of e-business, particularly in SMEs. They find that in order for e-business to be successful, companies need to provide and support the acquisition, sharing and application of knowledge. The authors also find that companies have to be careful not to over-invest in technologies and under-invest in mechanisms – such as HRM processes – to facilitate the flow of knowledge creation.

Last but not least, H. Lin provides closure to this special issue through studying the influence of enjoyment in helping others, knowledge self-efficacy, top management support, organisational rewards, and the use of information and communication technology on knowledge-sharing processes and superior firm innovation capability. Overall, this study demonstrates that employee willingness to both donate and collect knowledge enable the firm to improve innovation capability; and provides a guideline on how firms can promote a knowledge-sharing culture to sustain their innovation performance.

We firmly believe that the articles of this issue will not only provide for an interesting and a worthwhile reading material, but will also set the stage for enlarging and enriching the research base on the relationship between HRM and KM.

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Further reading

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