

High Performance Work Systems: an emerging dimension of Strategic Human Resource Management

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Abstract

Alignment of people strategy with business strategy has become inevitable. Synergy between people and business strategies fosters improved productivity, creativity and innovation in the organization. In turn, improved productivity, creativity and innovation boost sustainability and performance of the organization. HPWS is emerging as one of the key areas of concerns in SHRM. A lack of theoretical understanding and awareness of mechanism for implementation by practicing HRD managers limits their ability to enhance sustainability and performance of organizations. This article attempts to bring insights about HPWS for the practicing HRD managers.

Key Words: high performance work systems, high performance work practices, strategic human resource management, hrd managers, people strategy, alignment of people and business strategies.

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Introduction:

In twentieth century, one of the major challenges faced by practicing HRD managers is to understand business strategy of the organization. As a result, it limits their ability to design and execute an appropriate people strategy and bring alignment with business strategy to create synergies. Appropriately designed SHRM system creates an environment for improving productivity, creativity, and innovation by the people of an organization for developing business models, strategies, processes, technologies, services and products. The long term success and sustainability of the organization can be attributed to improved productivity, creativity and innovation carried out by the people within an organization on continuous basis. Synergized people and business strategies enhance resilience power of organization in global economic conditions of “VUCA” (volatile, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity). While business managers design and execute business strategy to create sustainable competitive advantage for the organization to win the battle of fierce competition, the role of practicing HRD manager is to design and execute people strategies in alignment with business strategy to achieve sustainable competitive advantage through people. Usually, business strategy contains the elements of product and service differentiation, unique positioning of organization in market place and identifying target groups for their products and services etc. Since people have taken central role in the organization, the practicing HRD managers have to design and execute people strategy covering following elements;

1. The Human Resources must be of value: people are a source of competitive advantage when they improve efficiency and effectiveness of organization. Customer value proposition is enhanced when people find ways to reduce cost, provide something unique to customers or combination of both.
2. The Human Resources must be rare: people are a source of competitive advantage when their skills, knowledge and abilities are not equally available to competitors.
3. The Human Resources must be difficult to copy: people are a source of competitive advantage when people’s capabilities, contribution and teamwork cannot be copied by competitors.

4. The Human Resources must be organized: people are a source of competitive advantage when the talents of people can be combined and deployed to work on new assignments at short notice.

But, the first question raised by practicing HRD managers is: How do we comprehend the SHRM systems, policies and practices as a part of people strategy?

SHRM systems, policies and practices as a part of people strategy:

Becker and Gerhart (1996) and Schuler (1992) observed that strategic HR activities may be conceptualized along several levels of analysis. At the lowest level, HR practices reflect specific organizational actions designed to achieve some specific outcomes. At a higher level of abstraction, HR policies reflect an employee-focused program that influences the choice of HR practices. An HR system operates at an even higher level of analysis and reflects a program of multiple HR policies that are espoused to be internally consistent and reinforced to achieve some overarching results. For example, any business conglomerate comprised of various businesses which are in to different stages of their life cycle, like some SBUs (strategic business units) in their incubation phase, stable and matured phase, growth and expansion phase and/or in their decay phase. In such a wide-ranging situation, the practicing HRD managers have to design and implement comprehensive strategic HR systems at corporate level, which is the highest level in the organization. Whereas, at the SBU level, the practicing HRD managers have to design and implement an appropriate HR policy to drive various employee-focused programs that influence the choice of various HR practices. Further, the practicing HRD managers have to design and implement appropriate HR practices at departmental and at employee levels to achieve specific outcome in each SBU. (e.g. cost reduction skills of people working in SBU which is in decay phase, merger and acquisition competencies of people working in SBU which is in growth and expansion phase etc.).The practicing HRD managers have to measure effectiveness of HR systems, policies and practices periodically to re-align people strategy with business strategy on continuous basis. The authors have standardized and published one such research instrument named “Strategic Talent Management Practices Scale” (Mehta, Pestonjee, & Khan, 2015). Let us take another example. An organization engaged in designing, manufacturing and selling stand-alone engineering equipments for a long time and now, the organization changes its business

strategy to re-position itself in market place as a total solution provider. This change in business strategy calls for reviewing its people strategy in terms of vision, mission, culture, mindset of people, skills and competencies of people, business systems and processes. The practicing HRD managers have to re-align people strategy (e.g. new skills for solution designing, selling skills for solution providing, project management capability etc.) of the organization in view of new business strategy. Let us take one more example. An engineering business conglomerate, knowing the market potential and core competency of organization, now decides to launch a new venture in the space of renewable energies as a part of their inorganic growth strategy by acquisition. The question to the practicing HRD managers is that the cultures of two different organizations need amalgamation or stay as two different cultures. The practicing HRD managers will have to re-align people strategy from the view point of multiple cultures of existing and newly acquired organizations that the people will now live their lives under one umbrella. (e.g. induction program, sensitize the people of newly acquired company about values systems and culture of existing organization etc.). One other example worth taking note of is of a business conglomerate operating in the space of B to B (business to business), B to C (business to consumer) and C to C (consumer to consumer) through various SBUs altogether. This business conglomerate would have offerings of engineering products, consumer products, banking, financial and insurance services, health care, hospitality, pharmaceuticals, IT and ITES, buying and selling on internet, infrastructure and power, steel and mining, automobile etc. under just one umbrella. For such business conglomerate, vision, mission and culture would also be different for each SBU. In addition to this, their corporate strategy, business models and business strategy would be different for each SBU. In such a wide-ranging business environment, the practicing HRD manager working at corporate level will have to take a bird's eye view to design and execute people strategy in alignment with corporate business strategy at corporate level. Not only would this, but the chief of the HRM will have to design broad level SHRM systems at corporate level. Followed by this, the practicing HRD managers working at various SBU level, will have to customize HR policies most appropriate to their SBU along with various HR practices at departmental and individual employee level.

The second question raised by practicing HRD manager is: Do we have a continuum for SHRM systems, policies & practices and how their conceptualizations vary across the continuum to achieve desired objectives?

Continuum for SHRM systems, policies, practices and its conceptualization:

SHRM systems are conceptualized as follows. First, HR systems are often implied to span a continuum of two extremes ranging from high performance or commitment-oriented to more control-oriented HR systems (Arthur, 1992, 1994; Delery & Doty, 1996; Guthrie, 2001; Huselid, 1995). Essentially, HR systems are oriented toward high performance through investment in employees or toward a more administrative or controlling approach to manage employees. “The goal of control human resource systems is to reduce direct labor costs, or improve efficiency, by enforcing employee compliance with specified rules and procedures and basing employee rewards on some measurable output criteria” (p. 672). Guthrie (2001), for instance, created a continuum HR system index with high scores reflecting high involvement, and low scores reflecting a more control-oriented HR system. However, some researchers have implied that many types of HR systems may not be limited to performance versus a control dichotomy (Lepak & Snell, 1999, 2002; Youndt et al., 1996). The second implication is that HR systems may be designed to achieve various objectives. For instance, some authors conceptualize these systems as comprising HR practices that focus on enhancing employee commitment (Arthur, 1992), and others conceptualize these systems as a focus to use certain HR practices to maximize employee potential and other practices to maximize administrative efficiency (Youndt et al., 1996). Others conceptualize these systems as a function of the degree to which different HR practices are oriented toward maximizing organizational performance (Huselid, 1995). Bowen and Ostroff (2004) noted that the content of HR systems “should be largely driven by the strategic goals and values of the organization,” and “to be effective in terms of content, the foci of the HRM practices must be designed around a particular strategic focus, such as service or innovation” (p. 206). Variations and conflicting conceptualizations of the same SHRM practices exist for different systems. For example, Dyer and Reeves (1995) noted that incentive bonuses were a component of the “control” HR system proposed by Arthur (1994), and a part of the “flexible” production scheme proposed by MacDuffie (1995). Becker and Gerhart (1996) cited differences in the use of variable pay by Arthur (1994), Huselid (1995), and MacDuffie (1995). Low emphasis was placed on variable pay as part of a “commitment” HR system in Arthur’s (1994) study, and greater emphasis was placed on variable pay as part of HPWS in studies by

Huselid (1995) and MacDuffie (1995). Huselid (1995) and Pfeffer (1995) described the use of internal promotions and access to formal grievance procedures as part of high-performance HR systems. However, Arthur (1994) and Ichniowski, Shaw, and Prensushi (1997) included these as elements of more rigid HR systems. Becker and Huselid (1998) termed these two practices as components of “bureaucratic HR” systems when viewed individually. From a theoretical perspective, a challenge is to identify which SHRM practices should be included or excluded to achieve desired strategic objectives. However, we do not have a well-accepted conceptualization of SHRM systems, policies and practices.

The third question raised by practicing HRD manager is: Which SHRM systems, policies and practices are best suited to organization from time to time? Which SHRM practices must be included or excluded and how these practices are interrelated. Is there a multiplicative or an additive effect which must be examined when such practices are implemented simultaneously? Are some SHRM practices redundant or complementary to others? These questions have no single answer!

Fitment of SHRM systems, policies and practices to the need of organization:

Improving on the arguments of Batt (2002), Delery and Shaw (2001), Huselid (1995), and MacDuffie (1995), it was posited that Human Resource (HR) systems consist of three distinct HR policy domains that are oriented toward influencing employee knowledge, skills and abilities, employee motivation and effort, and provide opportunities for employee contribution. The set and structure of SHRM practices for individuals and organizations, used separately in practice, fail to reveal potential significance of unmeasured SHRM practices when used together. Studies have documented organizational benefits derived from specific SHRM practices used in isolation but not synergistically. Therefore, a systems view is more relevant. Delery (1998, p. 291) argued that, “the basic assumption is that the effectiveness of any practice depends on the other practices in place. If all of the practices fit into a coherent system, the effect of that system on performance should be greater than the sum of the individual effects from each practice alone.” There are many variations of SHRM systems available in literature, such as HPWS (Huselid, 1995), human capital enhancing HR systems (Youndt et al., 1996), high involvement

HR (Lawler, 1992), sophisticated HR practices (Koch & McGrath, 1996), and commitment-oriented HR systems (Arthur, 1992; Lepak & Snell, 2002), HR systems for occupational safety, HR systems for customer service etc. to name a few. Inconsistencies in the SHRM structure and several conceptualizations have been observed in the literature. A lack of consistency and consensus regarding SHRM systems, policies and practices limits the ability of practicing HRD manager to truly understand their features to develop a cumulative body of knowledge for organizational results. SHRM has a long list of SHRM practices. Misunderstanding about SHRM systems, policies and practices by practicing HRD manager results in poor performance of the organization.

The fourth question raised by practicing HRD manager is: What is the importance of HPWS in twentieth century to achieve organizational strategic objectives?

HPWS: an emerging dimension of SHRM:

The High Performance Work System is an organizational architecture that brings together work, people, technology and information in a manner that optimizes the congruence of fit among them in order to produce high performance in terms of the effective response to customer requirements and other environmental demands and opportunities (Nadler, Gerstein, & Shaw, 1992). The consensus about high performance work systems (HPWS) (Huselid, 1995) or high involvement HR systems (Guthrie, 2001) exists with unclear relationship among them for their advantages. However, the question is: Is there a single overarching SHRM that is most effective or are there various SHRM that are effective within and across organizations for achieving different objectives? Organizational climate literature draws attention to different types of climates achieving different objectives. A climate has been defined as organizational members' perception of formal and informal organizational policies, practices, and procedures (Reichers & Schneider, 1990). In particular, organizational practices, policies, and procedures are argued to influence the organizational climate, which influences employees' collective attitudes and behaviors, which in turn influence organizational effectiveness (Ostroff & Bowen, 2000; Ostroff et al., 2003). The policies and practices, included in HR systems, have been argued to be particularly influential in shaping employees' climate perceptions (Klein & Sorra, 1996; Schneider, 1990). Conceivably the HR system that has received the most attention in literature is HPWS. As noted by Huselid (1995), "high performance work practice can improve the

knowledge, skills, and abilities of a firm's current and potential employees, increase their motivation, reduce shirking, and enhance retention of quality employees while encouraging non-performers to leave the firm'' (p. 635). As noted by Zacharatos et al. (2005), HPWS encompass elements of both the high-commitment and high-involvement HR system approach, but are broader in scope. These systems emphasize the potential competitive advantages that might be realized by employees through HR practices that treat workers with respect, invest in their development, and foster trust in management and commitment toward achieving organizational goals. Specifically, it consists of nearly all types of best practices including selective staffing, individual and group incentives, benefits, intensive training and development, performance appraisal, teams, employee involvement, work-life balance programs, and information sharing. Researchers have shown the use of HPWS to be associated with employee turnover as well as financial and market-based measures of organizational effectiveness (Huselid, 1995). The open system perspective states that successful organizations are good at transforming inputs into outputs. However, it does not identify the subsystem characteristics that distinguish effective organizations from others. Consequently, an entire field of research has blossomed around the objective of discovering the best "bundle" of organizational practices that offers competitive advantage. This research has had various labels over the years, but it is now most commonly known as high-performance work practices (HPWP) (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Zacharatos et al., 2005; Benson et al., 2006; and Seles et al., 2006.). The HPWP perspective is still developing, but it already reveals important information about specific organizational practices that improve the input-output transformation process. Still, this perspective has been criticized for focusing on shareholder and customer needs at the expense of employee well-being (Gorard 2001; Murray et al., 2001; Harley, 2005.). Organizations are more effective when they consider the needs and expectations of any individual group or other entity that get affected by, the organization's objectives and actions. This approach requires organizational leaders and employees to understand, manage, and satisfy the interest of their stakeholders (Friedman and Miles, 2006; Barnett, 2007; Freeman, Harrison and Wicks, 2007.). The stakeholder perspective personalizes the open system perspective; it identifies specific people and social entities in the external environment as well as within the organization (the internal environment). It also recognizes that stakeholder relations are dynamic; they can be negotiated and managed, not just taken as a fixed condition (Eden and Ackerman, 1998.).

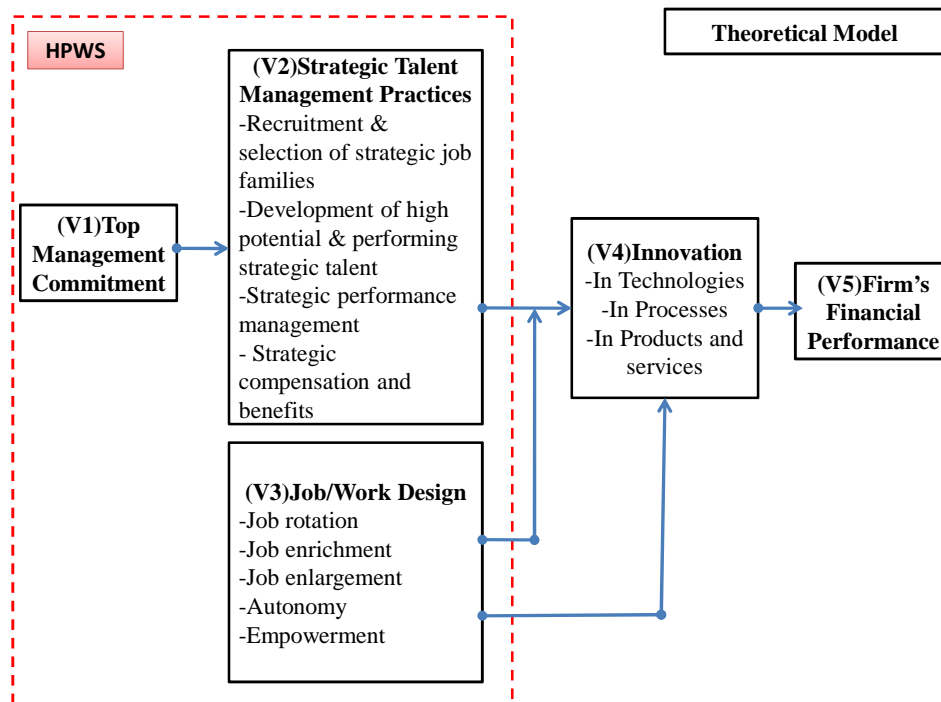
In twentieth century, SHRM has almost become synonymous to STMS (strategic talent management system) and the organizations have started to adopt some of the latest STMP (strategic talent management practices) like talent acquisition of strategic job families, development of high performing and high potential strategic talent, strategic performance management based on BSC (Balanced Scorecard) and/or MBO (Management by Objectives), and strategic compensation and benefits, which are aligned to business strategies. It is observed that, HPWS is yet to be adopted by practicing HRD managers working in small and medium sized industries, some of which aspires to transform them into large corporation. Therefore, it is suggested to the practicing HRD managers to review literature of past and current researches to design appropriate people strategy for their organization with a reference to HPWS.

Several researchers have documented advantages and pitfalls of adopting HPWS as a part of their people strategy in various organizations. However, researchers are yet to examine several hidden aspects of HPWS to achieve strategic objectives from the view point of synergized people and business strategies.

In the year of 2014, a research on the issue, it was decided to examine impact of HPWS on innovation and firm's performance in small and medium scale manufacturing industries of private sector in India. The objectives of the research study were to establish significance of relationships between Top Management Commitment, HPWS (Strategic Talent Management Practices, Job/Work design), Innovation and firm's financial performance and thus understand the impact of variables on each other individually and synergistically. The objective was also to examine the moderating role of Job/Work Design on Innovation. The research was carried out in fourteen small and medium scale manufacturing companies situated in various parts of India. Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were adopted for the purpose of triangulation. The sample comprised of 725 individuals working in 14 companies. A customized survey questionnaire consisting of 86 items was used. Construct validity and reliability, mean, standard deviation and correlation matrix were worked out. Cronbach's Alpha of 0.94 was found for the whole survey questionnaire. In addition to this, a customized survey questionnaire was administered to collect data on top management commitment and financial performance. Interviews of top management and HR heads were conducted for the purpose of further analysis and triangulation. The companies were classified, from collected data, as high and low top management commitment towards HPWS and their impact level on HPWS were analyzed. Inter-

correlation between HPWS (strategic talent management practices and job/work design) and Innovation were analyzed with direct and moderating role of Job/Work design. Impact of Innovation on company's financial performance was analyzed. Synergistic impact of all the variables on company's financial performance was also analyzed.

The authors developed and tested the following model;



(Source: Mehta, N. N, *Impact of High Performance Work Systems on Innovation and Firm's Performance*, AHRD (2014), Unpublished Fellowship Dissertation).

In context to above mentioned theoretical model, the different dimensions identified for each variable were: HPWS – talent acquisition, performance management, compensation, training and development, strategic benefits, skill variety for the variable of Strategic Talent Management Practices: Job characteristics, task identity, autonomy, job empowerment, job enlargement, skill multiplicity for the variable of Job/Work design: thinking space, innovation entrepreneurship, idea management, innovation culture, innovation technology, inbuilt innovation for the variable of Innovation from the view point of Multicollinearity. Descriptive statistic was deployed for the analysis of gender, age group, experience, and qualification. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (zero order) was deployed to examine impact and correlations between variables. Multiple Liner Regression analysis was applied to summarize the data as well as to study

relationship between single criterion variable and many predictor variable and goodness of fit of model. Hierarchical (moderator) Multiple Regression analysis was applied to examine moderating effect of Job/Work design on the relationships of STMP and Innovation. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was deployed to examine confirmatory and exploratory model fit to proposed theoretical model.

The outcomes of research in brief were: (1) Strategic Talent Management Practices (STMP) were positively and highly correlated with Job Design and all its dimensions (Job Characteristics, Task Identity, Autonomy, Job Empowerment, Job enlargement, Skill multiplicity). Strategic Talent Management Practices (STMP) were also positively and highly correlated with Innovation and all its dimensions (Thinking Space, Innovation Entrepreneurship, Idea Management, Innovation Culture, Innovation Technology, and Inbuilt Innovation). The magnitude of relationship of Strategic Talent Management Practices (STMP) was studied with Job Design and Innovation in reference to High and Low committed Top Management. It was observed that, the magnitude was smaller on Autonomy, Job enlargement, Skill multiplicity, and overall Job Design for low committed Top Management in comparisons to high committed Top Management. The magnitude of relationship of Strategic Talent Management Practices (STMP) with Innovation was smaller on Idea Management, Innovation Culture, Innovation Technology, and overall Innovation for low committed Top Management in comparisons to high committed Top Management. (2) The multiple linear regression analysis revealed that proposed variables are significant predictors of Innovation in case of both high and low committed Top Management. (3) The result confirms that there was no overall moderating effect of interaction of Strategic Talent Management Practices and Job Design on Innovation. There was no moderating effect of interaction of Strategic Talent Management Practices and Job Design on Innovation in case of high and low committed Top Management. However, the probability to reject the hypothesis was lesser in case of high committed Top Management in comparisons to low committed Top Management. This leads us to infer that there is a low moderating effect of interaction of Strategic Talent Management Practices and Job Design on Innovation. (4) Job Characteristics, Task Identity and Job Design (in combination with Skill Variety & STMP) influenced the innovation ability of employees. At the same time, many other factors/variables of even greater influence were clearly operating to determine the innovation and resulting financial performance and were beyond the scope of the study.

Conclusions:

Alignment of people and business strategies is extremely important for the practicing HRD managers to create sustainable competitive advantage through people, develop synergies and build resilience power of organization in competitive business environment. While lots of ambiguity and non-consensus about SHRM systems, policies and practices exist in literature, HPWS is now drawing the attention of the practicing HRD managers. Hope that this article will bring insights for them. It is suggested to practicing HRD managers to undertake thorough literature review on SHRM and HPWS in particular and include or exclude relevant HPWS practices while developing people strategy for their respective organizations. Further, it is also suggested to practicing HRD managers working particularly in small and medium scale industries to adopt an appropriate HPWS as part of their people strategy and carryout research on HPWS implemented in various formats in their organization for adding value.

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