

Terjesen, Siri (2005) *International Human Resource Management: A Review of Three Texts*. *Management Revue* 16(2):pp. 512-517

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International Human Resource Management: A Review of Three Texts

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Books Reviewed:

- *International Human Resource Management*. 2004. Edited by Anne-Wil Harzing & Joris Van Ruysseveldt. 2nd edition. Sage. ISBN 0-7619-4040-5. 499 pages. \$150 hardback; \$60 softback
- *International Human Resource Management: Managing People in a Multinational Context*. 2004. Peter J. Dowling & Denise E. Welch. 4th edition. Thomson. ISBN 1-84480-013-X. 333 pages. \$60 softback
- *Human Resource Management in Europe: Evidence of Convergence?* 2004. Edited by Chris Brewster, Wolfgang Mayrhofer & Michael Morley. Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann. ISBN 0-7506-4717-5. 486 pages. \$38 softback

This special issue is dedicated to exploring the convergence and divergence of national systems of industrial relations (IR) and human resource management (HRM). Faced with increasingly competitive environments, multinational firms may adapt certain management practices which are then transmitted across countries. Parts One and Two of this special issue have explored the convergence-divergence debate in international human resource management (IHRM) research.

We now turn our attention to three texts published in 2004 which attempt to synthesise and integrate IHRM research for researcher, student and practitioner audiences. The two entitled *International Human Resource Management* are theory-based review texts situating IHRM in the greater context of international management. The first *IHRM* is the long-awaited second edition edited by Anne-Wil Harzing and Joris Van Ruysseveldt; the other a fourth edition textbook now authored by Peter Dowling and Denise Welch. *HRM in Europe: Evidence of Convergence?* is edited by Chris Brewster, Wolfgang Mayrhofer and Michael Morley and reports twenty-three European countries' research findings from the Cranet survey. We now review the three texts separately, paying special attention to contributions to comparative IHRM and the convergence versus divergence debate.

International Human Resource Management. Edited by Anne-Wil Harzing & Joris Van Ruysseveldt.

IHRM is an ambitious research-based text with the explicit goal of providing a comprehensive, integrated and international perspective on cross border HRM. The editors have extensively revised and expanded the first edition (1995) into 18 chapters written by 24 eminent scholars from around the world. With international breadth of authors and research, the result is considerably less 'Dutch' than the first edition.

The book is divided into four parts. Part one provides an overview of the context, strategy, structure and processes of internationalisation. The second part examines HRM from a comparative perspective. Part three focuses on issues in the management of expatriate and international staff. Finally, part four takes a comparative and international perspective on industrial relations. As this special issue is dedicated to comparative IHRM, we focus on the relevant parts (2 & 4) and respective chapters (5-9 & 15-18) in this tome.

Part two is completely revised from the first edition and examines HRM from a comparative structure beginning with chapter 5's 'societal analysis' framework integrating the dominant institutional and culturist approaches to explain HRM differences. Chapter 6 provides an overview of multiple means to quantifying cultural differences across borders. There is an uneasy transition from this review of positivist research and into the predominantly qualitative approach to HRM processes in Europe put forward in chapter 7. In chapter 8, "HRM in East Asia," the authors compare and contrast HRM practices in the capitalist markets economies of Japan and Taiwan with those in the socialist market economies of China and Vietnam. Finally, chapter 9 covers HRM practice in developing countries in terms of perceptions, current understanding, and emerging approaches.

Part four takes a comparative and international perspective on IR, attempting to integrate understanding of these areas into the greater body of IHRM and international management research. Chapter 15 asks 'Why do companies transfer practices?' and explores approaches and drivers of the transfer of HRM processes in MNCs. The next chapter focuses on different dimensions of capitalism. The potential for 'Europeanisation' of IR and the role and relevance of European IR bodies are reviewed in chapters 17 and 18.

The authors have taken great care to incorporate latest findings into this research-based text, making it an excellent resource of research newcomers, such as PhDs, and a solid reference for old hands in the field. In fact, this reviewer has already recommended key chapters to PhD students in the early stage of their theses. There is an absence of tables of latest statistics, but this will surely slow the aging of the text. Chapter pedagogy is limited to discussion questions at the conclusion of each chapter and short but engaging case vignettes embedded in the text of the chapters. Instructors using this text for a course may wish to identify a separate set of cases.

The major strength of this book is its exhaustive and readable review of standard theoretical perspectives which are supplemented with the latest research findings. A weakness is that some chapters are stronger than others in terms of concept development and updated research references. Assembling this volume was likely a meticulous and iterative process for both the editors and contributors, but the effort makes this second edition a worthwhile read and reference.

International Human Resource Management: Managing People in a Multinational Context.
Peter J. Dowling & Denise E. Welch.

This fourth edition of a popular *IHRM* teaching text focuses on HRM practices in multinational firms and continues without Randall Schuler. Eleven chapters, all written by the two authors, are organised in three main parts with a short fourth part comprised of cases and exercises. Throughout the text, there is a balance of concise interesting cases from multinational firms operating in home and host countries around the world.

Part one's three chapters provide an overview of the multinational context of IHRM. Part two focuses on the management and support of the lifecycle of international careers, particularly expatriate assignments, including recruitment, selection, training, development, compensation and re-entry. Part three reviews international HR issues, trends and future challenges. Finally, part four contains a very short and diverse set of six cases and four exercises.

Again, we focus on the text's discussion of convergence and divergence of IHRM practices. Dowling and Welch's text is shorter than the Harzing and Van Ruysseveldt tome, and provides considerable less treatment of this special debate. Indeed the book is focused on HRM as experienced in the MNC rather than comparative accounts of HRM or analyses of human behaviour in international contexts. Relevant content is contained in part three (chapters 8-11). Chapter 8 looks at the host-country context of HRM from a number of perspectives including culture. The implications of EU integration of IR are briefly addressed in chapter 9. The debate between ethical relativism and global values is covered in chapter 11.

In addition to the clear and concise presentation of main topics, a major strength of this text is its broad pedagogy including usual summary and discussion questions at the conclusion of each chapter, short cases and exercises in part four, useful websites in the Appendix and extensive instructor and student references on the web. Again, an instructor may consider supplementing the scant part four with external case material provided on the book's website or a separate book of cases. The weakness of this text is that its abbreviated nature, other special topics receive less attention. For example, Harzing and Van Ruysseveldt commissioned an entire chapter to women's issues in IHRM (by Hilary Harris) where Dowling and Welch devote just two pages. There are exceptions: for example, the latter text devotes four pages to one of the author's special research topics, language standardisation and HR implications.

In summary, the book is an excellent primer for teaching IHRM to undergraduate and graduate students.

Human Resource Management in Europe: Evidence of Convergence? Edited by Chris Brewster, Wolfgang Mayrhofer & Michael Morley.

What are HRM practices in Europe? Are they converging around a US or a European model, or retaining divergence in terms of national distinctiveness? As the subtitle, 'Evidence of Convergence?' suggests, this edited volume addresses these questions. This edited work reports research from the Cranet-E study, a longitudinal survey of HRM practices in 23 European countries. There are five key elements of the survey: (1) role of HRM functions and HRM strategies, (2) training and development, (3) performance measures and rewards, (4) employee communications, work councils and unions and (5) organisation of work. The thirteen chapters and first appendix are authored by 45 scholars who are mostly native to and currently based in Europe. They bring respective world-views and perspectives to this directly comparative and evidence-based body of research.

The book is divided in three parts. Part one (chapter 1) reviews the major theoretical frameworks and conceptual arguments in the convergence and divergence debate in IHRM. Part two (chapters 2 - 10) contains comparative findings from the Cranet-E study of HRM policies and practices in 23 individual countries grouped into nine multi-country chapters. Part three (chapter 11) summarises the research findings.

Chapter 1 is the strongest aspect of the book, providing a broad overview of the origins of HRM and their implications before introducing the main arguments in the HRM convergence versus divergence debate which neatly summarized on pages 18-20:

“Convergence theory suggests that antecedents specific to the organisation explain the existence of HR policies, while country specific differences are less significant (Sparrow et al., 1994; Weber et al., 2000; Tregaskis et al., 2001). Thus, while differences in management systems have arisen as a result of the geographical isolation of businesses, the consequent development of differing beliefs and value orientations of national cultures are being superseded by the logic of technology and markets which requires the adoption of specific and therefore, universally applicable policies, approaches and management techniques (Kidger, 1991). . . Proponents of the divergence thesis argue, in direct contrast, that personnel management systems, far from being economically or technologically derived, reflect national institutional contexts which do not respond readily to the imperatives of technology or the market. According to this institutionalist perspective, organisational choice is limited by institutional pressures, including the state, regulatory structures, interests groups, public opinion and norms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Scott, 1983; Oliver, 1991). . . national, and in some cases regional, institutional contexts are slow to change, partly because they derive from deep-seated beliefs and value systems and partly because significant re-distributions of power are involved. More importantly, they argue that change is path-dependent. In other words, even when change does occur it can be understood only in relation to the specific social context in which it occurs (Maurice et al., 1986; Poole, 1986).”

Three unique convergence-divergence hypotheses are then examined. In the first instance, market forces are said to propel convergence in Europe to a US model. A second perspective is that institutional pan-European forces are actually leading to a European model which is unique to the US. A final model proposes that the irreconcilable differences among European countries may serve to retain divergence or at least to thwart convergence. This chapter does an excellent job of framing the major issues for readers but could be expanded to position the special topics into the IHRM and international business literatures.

The heart of the book is part two, the nine comparative chapters which each contain, for a set of countries, an overview of these countries' institutions and then a summary of the Cranet results. It is not clear how the comparative chapters' country groups were selected, though geographic proximity and cultural similarity seem to play a role. For example, chapter 2 summarises the UK and Ireland's 'Traditions and Transitions in HRM' while chapter 8 is devoted to 'Denmark and Norway: Siblings or Cousins?'

Each chapter begins with a lengthy introduction that reads, and is also laid out, like an atlas with statistics on land size, population, density, capital and major cities, official languages and religions followed by paragraphs on topography, legal, institutional and political environments and so forth. The charts, mostly from Eurostat and OECD generally end with the year 2000 and will quickly date the book. At times, this overview seems particularly tedious and overly front heavy. For example, the UK and Ireland chapter is split equally between an overview of the institutional environment (16 pages) and a discussion of HRM, with emphasis on survey results (16 pages). Some paragraphs, particularly on topography and climate, appear particularly superfluous for developing an understanding of comparative HRM. For example, the second paragraph in the Ireland section details the country's mountains, peat bogs and small islands.

The remainder of each chapter is devoted to the real heart of the book: a discussion of comparative HRM in the countries. Each chapter retains a distinct national and regional flavour. Whilst some of the material covered is fresh and unpublished elsewhere, other chapters do not include any truly original or new contributions. Readers who are already familiar with certain contributors' research will not find anything that they did not already know about their arguments and insights. Other researchers may have questions about the true meaning of the data, for example that reported on changes in line management responsibility in various countries. See, for example, Table 2.36 on page 47 of the UK and Ireland chapter. This particular table indicates that in the UK, line management involvement with pay and benefits has generally increased more than in Ireland. But did Ireland have more line management involvement with pay and benefits to begin with?

These nine comparative chapters also feel as if they were too quickly assembled. For example, the comparative chapters include country map graphics which seems to have been plucked randomly from the Internet and which do not always print well on the pages. See, for example, the Spain map which shows sunshine forecasts around the country for September 28. This hasty assembly detracts heavily from the book. The chapters also include haphazardly selected scenic pictures from the countries profiled. Again, these images detract from the text and do not lend anything to the chapters or to the book overall.

This space could have been better invested in deeper content development, comparative analysis for another country, or overall reduction to well under 500 pages.

The concluding chapter 11: 'Convergence, Stasis, or Divergence?' begins by addressing key concerns with analyzing the results and then speculates on directional convergence in the development of HR practices in Europe. Strong evidence is shown for European HRM convergence in terms of the decrease in HR department size and increases in both training and development and communication to employees around company strategy and financial performance. More frequent use of performance related measurement and compensation is also reported. Considerable evidence is reported for convergence in the use of flexible working practices whilst the summary of weak evidence includes unsubstantiated hypotheses around convergence in the level of policy decisions in HR and in the decentralisation of responsibility.

The Cranet survey methodology appendix may prove valuable for researchers designing surveys whilst the appendix on research team experiences could be interesting for management scientists engaged in longitudinal, multi-country research in other disciplines such as Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's study of entrepreneurial activity in thirty-nine countries.

Brewster, Mayrhofer and Morley's text is certainly the most comprehensive of its kind in examining European HRM practices. However, the individual country and region descriptive chapters comprise the bulk of the book (some 388 pages) and there is relatively little analysis and summary (a total of just 58 pages in the bookend introduction and conclusion chapters).

The editors' expressed focus for this text is first students and instructors and then researchers and practitioners. It would be difficult to imagine designing a course around this book. Rather, the first and last chapters and a handful of the comparative texts could make for an interesting seminar. This reviewer can imagine students from Europe or keen to work in Europe quickly flipping to the chapter covering their native country or the country in which they would like to work. The pedagogy is inconsistent across chapters, sometimes 'learning questions,' sometimes 'teaching questions,' and left out entirely in other chapters. This could result in frustration on the part of both instructors and students. Meanwhile, for an academic, this text, like the Cranet research it is based upon, may raise more questions than it answers.