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Reconfiguration and regulation of supply chains and HRM in times of economic crisis

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Introduction

Although it is commonly held that the present period of economic challenges dates back to the financial crisis of 2008, a longer view reveals that the global economy has suffered from volatile and uneven growth punctuated with recession since the early 1970s, in contrast to the long boom of the decades that preceded it. A feature of this long crisis has been the relative empowerment of owners and those leveraging highly fungible assets over long term investors and those with sunk capital – such as workers – in a specific firm and a particular locale (Wood 2013). In response to this, and to greatly heightened global competition, many firms have shifted larger components of production towards suppliers, and, in many instances adopted a more contingent and arms-length approach to contracting.

Given these trends, there has been growing interest – and concern – about the variation in the nature and quality of employment relations and HR practices down supply chains (Donaghey et al. 2014; c.f. Gereffi et al. 2005). In particular, concerns have been raised about the way in which prominent Western organizations may base their competitiveness on the ability to source ultra-low cost components or finished products through the use of suppliers that deploy extreme forms of labour repression (Donaghey et al. 2014). These forms of labour repression, entailing violations of labour rights, have sometimes resulted in negative publicity for large multinational firms. The standard corporate line of defence of dominant firms in global value chains (GVCs) in response to such periodic exposes and scandals has been a lack of knowledge about the excesses of their suppliers (Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen 2014). Global Value Chain (GVC) theory explores the operation of supply networks across national boundaries: its core concern is not only the volume and geographic reach of supplier networks, but the differences in the relative value accrued at different stages of the production process and disparities in relative power and autonomy (Gereffi et al. 2005). It is these disparities and their causes and consequences for human resource management that form the core concern of this chapter.

This chapter draws on a range of interdisciplinary perspectives from HRM, employment relations, global value chains (GVCs) and supply chain management to ask three main questions: to what extent do dominant suppliers explicitly or implicitly promote labour repression down their supply chains in hard times? How has the reconfiguration of supply chains impacted on the dissemination of practices up and down supply chains? And how might different - and in many instances, diminishing - forms of formal and informal regulation impact on both of these?

In response to the long crisis, firms have engaged in the unbundling of vertically integrated bureaucracies' direct ownership and control of operations. An integral component of this unbundling has been via outsourcing and the subsequent development and extension of supply chain relations, with the supply chain being simply defined as a network of companies that combine together in different ways to deliver goods and services to consumers, and in doing so crosses regional, national and continental boundaries (Christopher 1998, 2005; Kraus and Lind 2007). This creation of new 'intermediate markets' in formerly integrated production processes (Jacobides 2005, p. 465) has often been stimulated by intentions to focus more upon core high value-added competencies, and/or to save direct and indirect costs, and/or to develop greater flexibility with regard to demand swings and product or service innovation (see Kremic et al. 2006).

At the same time, with crisis has come the extension of the geographic scope of supply chains; traditional supply chain relations have become greatly extended across national boundaries, but with dominant parties retaining or deepening their influence over suppliers, interlinked in what has been termed ‘global value chains ‘(GVCs) to reflect disparities in power and relative resource allocations and both geographical and organizational reconfiguration (Gibbon et al., 2008). These developments have meant that, in practice, it is often no longer individual firms but supply chains that compete in particular markets. Therefore, the management of supply chain participants’ inter-organizational relationships, as a basis of competitive advantage, has assumed ever-greater importance (Ageron et al. 2013). The resultant vertical disintegration of what Powell (1990) defined as conventional bureaucratically ordered production and control ‘hierarchies’, and the associated emergence of global value chains have together served to ‘redefine the work and employment nexus’ for many employees (Grimshaw and Rubery 2005, p.1027).

Reconfiguring of supply chain networks and competitive advantage

Two major episodes of value chain development have occurred: the first was in response to the start of the long crisis in the early 1970s, and the second in response to its intensification from 2008 onwards. In the case of the former, it constituted a strategic response to the exigencies created by structural changes in input costs, technological change (and the unanticipated consequences thereof) and intensified global competition (Reve 1990; Harland et al. 1999; Kraus and Lind 2007). The restructuring of operations implicit in the development and extension of supply chains entails, to varying degrees, a vertically integrated bureaucracy: ‘downsizing’ to a core of high value-added competencies which include a brokerage role for co-ordinating the network (Budros 2004), ‘outsourcing’ upstream supply and downstream distribution activities and ‘delayering’ since internal hierarchical chains of command can become less important and possibly attenuated (Jarillo 1993; Nassimbeni 1998; Christopher 1998). Different strategic choices with regard to such organizational unbundling were thought to lead to different types of network. For instance, Miles and Snow (1986) first differentiated between: internal network structures which rely on internally developed units to provide goods and services to a core organizational unit; stable network structures which utilize external providers selectively; and dynamic network structures which make extensive use of outsourcing through contracts with external providers. Other commentators classified networks according to variation in different aspects of the inter-organizational relationships which evolve between participants in terms of: strategic alignment (Campbell and Wilson 1996); direction and orientation (Hinterhuber and Levin 1994); the extent of collaboration (Cravens et al. 1996); the types of co-ordination mechanisms (Grandori and Soda 1995); the nature of the social and economic exchanges occurring (Rosenfeld 1996); the number of lateral links, reverse loops and two way exchanges (Harland et al. 2001); and the degree of supply chain maturity (Tomkins 2001).

To varying degrees, supply chain networks may therefore be seen to entail the vertical disintegration of the agglomerated bureaucracy primarily associated with Fordism, and the blurring of organizational boundaries (Amaeshi et al. 2008). Here, a range of participatory suppliers specialize in the provision of a range of usually relatively lower value-added goods and services to lead or buyer firms who have usually retained higher-value added work (Kaplinsky 2005). In part enabled by technological developments in communication allowing the hyper-mobility of capital (Kraus and Lind 2007), networks were also seen to potentially constitute 'lean', 'flexible', low cost organization structures (Womack et al. 1990; Krause 1997; Cooper and Slagmulder 2004) capable of 'unblocking' organizational learning, communication, innovation and change (Badarocco 1991; Bush and Frohman 1991; Hamel 1991; Bolton et al. 1994; Womack and Jones 1996) whist enabling risk-sharing (Blos et al. 2009) and the leveraging of inter-firm network resources (Gulati 2007). In other words, networks were seen to be able to gain faster access to new markets and develop new products more quickly (Van der Meer-Kooistra and Kamminga 2010) so as to create long term competitive advantage by being particularly suited to the contingencies arising in an increasingly globalized, uncertain and competitive environment (Antai 2011).

These organizational developments have been accompanied by numerous claims regarding the economic ‘up-grading’ of firm-level competitive advantage (Selwin 2013, p.76) and improved flexibility. For instance, it has been argued that it is the network as a whole which is usually seen to be flexible rather than the individual supplier, since, due to the asymmetrical dependencies often created, it is the mixture of goods and services available to the buyer which can be reconfigured by either varying the combination of participants (Piore and Sable 1984; Burnes and New 1997; Christopher 1998; Handfield et al. 2000) and/ or by enhancing the ability of existing participants to alter their product or service offerings (Gosain et al. 2005). In either case, there is also the perceived potential for reducing the cost to the buyer of changing products or processes whilst seeking out lower, or squeezing extant, material and labour costs.

Reconfiguring of global supply chains and HR practices

The reconfiguration of supply chains has been associated with the rise of more contingent and arms-length contracting in many sectors, with important but complex implications for employer-employee relations and HR practices. Instead of vertically integrated bureaucracy, there has been the development of various combinations of post-bureaucratic, flexible, high performance forms of organization and management wherein network development plays a significant role as a vehicle for further marketizing the employment relationship and associated broader HR practices (see Hastings 1993; Hecksher 1994; Osbourne and Plastric 1998; Volberda 1998; Applebaum et al. 2000; Hendry 2006; Josserand et al. 2006). These organizational developments arguably reflect the rise of a neo-liberal institutional trajectory, thought to be shared, to varying degrees, by most 'advanced' economies (Streek 2009). Closely associated with this perceived trajectory is the demand to open organizations to the discipline and associated efficiencies provided by the logic of the free market (Harvey 2005; Kunda and Souday 2005; Cerny 2008; Skorstadt 2009; Vallas and Hill 2012). This trend towards more 'arms' length' employer-employee relations seems to happen in two interrelated ways.

Firstly, global competition and capital mobility exerts pressure to outsource particular elements of production processes in order to exploit cost-saving differentials in employment conditions (see Flecker 2009), whilst simultaneously increasing the pressure upon retained employees to be competitive vis a vis the prospective offerings of alternative external lower-cost sub-contractors (see Appay 1998; Flecker and Meil 2010, p. 695). In this context, Hendry (2001) has argued that agglomerated, vertically integrated, bureaucracies usually protected many employees from the operation of market forces. However, post-bureaucratic developments are characterized by 'relationships between firms and their employees, and relationships between employees,…governed quite openly, by rules of the market rather than those of traditional obligation' (Hendry 2001, p.213; see also du Gay 1996, 2000, 2005; Vallas and Hill 2012). Secondly, it has been widely noted that as an alternative to, or as a complement for bureaucratic control, management may actively attempt to inscribe retained direct employees with the ethos and logic of free market enterprise as part of various culture management initiatives which blur the distinction between the identities of consumer and employee (du Gay and Salaman 1992; Needham 2003; Salaman 2005; McCabe 2008; Keenoy 2009; Makela 2013).

It is also evident that through redefining organizational boundaries between internal and external labour markets, a significant outcome of vertical disintegration has been the further development of segmented labour markets. These processes appear to potentially entail three interrelated developments. First, it has led to the retention of a relatively stable functionally flexible core of employees doing high added value work and to a degree being relatively sheltered from the negative consequences of such change (Hassel 2014). Second, it has resulted in the direct employment of usually less skilled employees sometimes located in numerically flexible peripheries undertaking more precarious and vulnerable jobs (Holst 2014). Third, it has contributed toward the outsourcing of lower added-value work to smaller external organizations which, to varying degrees, compete in the open market to provide a range of goods and services (Atkinson 1984; Masters and Miles 2002; Kalleberg 2003). Within these supplier firms, there are sometimes also moves to develop relatively stable and skilled core workforces (Selwyn 2012, p.206). Therefore, the implications for employment conditions are complex, with the potential for a range of different employer-employee relationships and HR practices to emerge in response to variable supply chain network configurations (Kalleberg 2003; Doellgast and Greer 2007; Taylor 2012).

Whilst such potential for variation cannot be ignored, Kalleberg (2009) also argues that with the push for flexibility by governments and employers, generally there has been a move towards more precarious employment contracts. It is thought that by encouraging the proliferation of non-standard employment, the organizational developments noted above have served to reduce job security and increase feelings of insecurity (Fullerton and Wallace 2007; Hacker 2008), erode wage rates and extend low wage sectors in western economies (Appay 1998; Gautié and Schmitt 2010), intensify work (Wills 2009), increase inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Emmeneger et al. 2012), encourage anomie (Sennett 1998, 2006; Johnson and Duberley 2011) and individualize work (Gheradi and Murgai 2013). Moreover, these tendencies have been associated with the expectation that management and employees must act as competitive free-agents who are often required to sell their labour, directly or indirectly, in multiple organizational sites to any available bidder with the responsibility for maintaining their own employability being delegated to the self-investing individual (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Cappelli 1999; Barley and Kunda 2004; Cooper 2005; Baruch 2006; Dardot and Laval 2013). Here, following neoliberal logic regarding the efficiency maximizing attributes of competition, employees are subjected to the discipline of market forces: something that emphasizes their instrumental value for companies and their ever-present potential for disposability (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Flecker 2009). This situation is sometimes exacerbated by deteriorating employment conditions caused by opportunistic employers eschewing or undermining labour standards and ILO conventions (Horney 2008; Vachani and Post 2012; Locke 2013), often in response to the buyer's lack of commitment to long-term supply chain relationships (Kaufman and Saravanamuthu 2009, p.298) and their strategy of exploiting competition between multiple suppliers to reduce costs (Appay 1998). Nevertheless, it has been argued that in some situations, the search for lower labour costs has served to relatively improve the extant employment conditions of some suppliers, although this may have been primarily motivated by branding concerns (Bartley 2007).

The degree to which HR practices are influenced may be mediated or intensified by the nature of buyer-supplier relationships. The nature of relationships has increasingly been conceptualised in terms of 'transactional' and 'relational' contracting, both among organizations (Lorenz 1991; Bolton et al. 1994; Brown et al. 2004; Shub and Stonebreaker 2009; Cadden et al. 2013) and within them (see, for example, Rousseau and Parks 1993). As with other conceptualizations, such as 'coercive' and 'enabling' (Free 2007), or 'arm's length' and 'obligational' (Sako 1992), the transactional-relational classification seems to largely derive from MacNeil's ideal-type formulation (1978, 1985) of contract governance. In this formulation, the transactional approach to contract governance was conceptualized in terms of a formal adversarial relationship between buyers and suppliers, characterized by a short-term economic exchange and zero-sum conflict of interest in which integration and control are achieved through the implementation of binding, legalistic contractual specifications and the discipline of quasi-market forces where there is an expectation of no altruistic behaviour between parties, and communication is limited and formal. In contrast, a relational approach entails a long-term, collaborative, social and economic exchange between parties that is characterized by informality, mutual trust, the assumption of mutual gains, interpersonal attachments, commitment to specific partners, reciprocal altruism, co-operative problem solving and extensive formal and informal communication. In principle, any firm may manage inter-organizational relationships within supply chains using either strategy, or some blend of these ideal-types in any particular contract, or different contractual forms with different suppliers (Blois 2002). The nature of buyer-supplier relationships may impact upon employment conditions by, for example, either moderating or exacerbating the operation of marketization and either enabling or disabling regulation (Grimshaw and Rubery 2005). Where firms and their suppliers work closely together there might be transfer of knowledge, which could potentially result in the supplier mimicking the good practices HR of the lead firm. However, the extent to which knowledge transfer of HR practices is likely to happen may be affected by the supplier's own cost-cutting agenda, and external factors such as global competition and national legislation (Wood et al, 2016).

The regulation of employment conditions in supply chains

Where employment conditions are adversely affected, there have been calls for increased regulation. One of the key actors potentially involved in regulation is the trade union. However, vertical disintegration and marketization creates considerable operational problems for trade unions that could undermine their ability to regulate employment conditions through collective bargaining. Since outsourcing usually moves employment to smaller organizations that are often located abroad, it undermines prior approaches to employment regulation as it disrupts mutual dependencies between workers and employers, crucial for meaningful collective bargaining. As Wills (2009, pp. 444-5) argues, vertical disintegration creates ‘spatial and emotional distance’ between many workers and their ‘real’ employer at the top of the contracting chain who ultimately determines their employment conditions. As Riisgaard and Hammer (2011, p.168) also note, the result is that ‘power in the employment relationship now transcends organizational boundaries.’ Simultaneously, the threat of outsourcing has also been used to wring concessions out of retained employees (see Flecker 2009). In some cases, this has led to the adoption of what amounts to a defensive position by trade unions with a focus upon protecting core workers to the exclusion of others, thereby increasing labour market segmentation (Emmenegger et al. 2012). Nevertheless, in some sectors trade union pressure and demands from wider society have promoted better labour standards and employment practices amongst suppliers (Hassell 2014), although the extent to which social up-grading has happened has been increasingly questioned (Barrientos et al. 2011). Here, much may depend upon the prevailing form of network governance which can influence the ‘vulnerability’ of employers to trade union action (Riisgaard and Hammer 2011, pp.185-6).

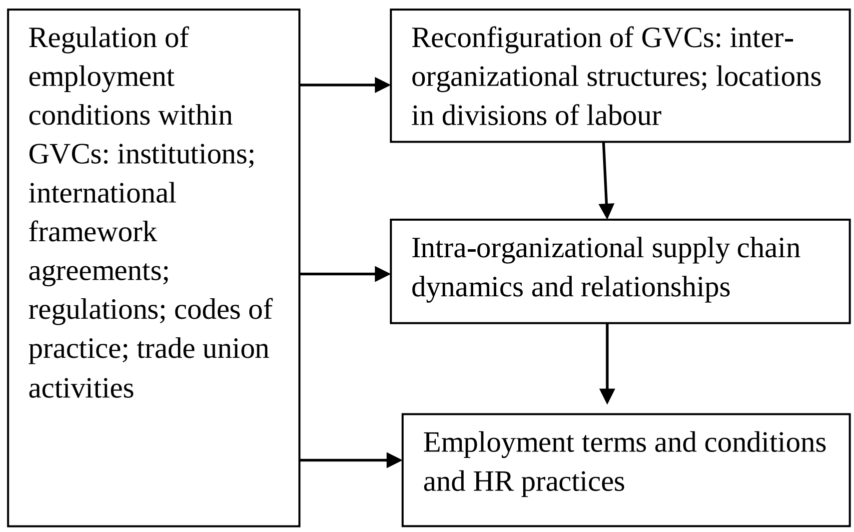
Another potential form of regulation is internal to the firm. There have been some institutional attempts to articulate voluntary labour standards aimed at influencing contractors’ employment practices, especially in global supply chains, to militate against the evident potential for a rush to the bottom, possibly encouraged by what may be seen as a governance deficit (Locke 2013). Generally, the form that these attempts at supply chain regulation take varies considerably (Reinecke et al. 2012). Such interventions could include: voluntary codes of conduct, training programmes and supplier audits (see, for example, Ford 2011); international framework agreements between MNCs and global union federations in specific industries (see, for example, the examples provided by the International

Organisation of Employers 2006); labour clauses in Generalised Systems of Preferences (GSP) and free trade agreements; international guidelines and voluntary labour standards. Company codes are often derived from more general codes of practice, such as the ICFTU/ ITS basic code of labour practice, the ILO conventions, or Standard SA 8000, a management system tool aimed at regulating working conditions. However, Kaufman and Saravanamuthu (2009, p.317) argue that if voluntary labour standards such as SA 8000 are to deliver long-term benefits to employees they have to be based upon informed worker participation in their design, implementation and monitoring and require long-term sustainable relationships between buyers and suppliers with added market-based incentives for improved social performance. Such a situation is rare: the result, they claim, is that voluntary labour standards are primarily directed towards ‘reducing consumer guilt instead of protecting the (weaker) stakeholders’ (Kaufman and Saravanamuthu 2009, p.309; see also Locke 2013). Thus, codes of conduct are arguably the weakest form of private regulation (Donaghey et al 2014). Moreover, voluntary labour standards are constantly undermined by the cost-minimization pressures present in highly competitive global markets (Anner et al., 2013; Barrientos et al. 2011). Thus, labour standards can often decline down the supply chain (Taylor, 2012). However, the extent of decline may vary, and is also influenced by factors such as supply chain strategies of multinationals and their fear of reputational damage, trade union and consumer pressure and industry and ownership form (Taylor, 2012; Donaghey et al 2014).

The implications for HR practices can therefore vary according to a range of extra, intra and inter organizational factors including location of a particular workplace in the supply chain, the nature of the work being undertaken, the availability of alternative sources of labour, and, significantly, the nature of the social and economic relationships between customers and suppliers. Although the broad process of liberalization and contingent contracting may have intensified since 2008, it can be argued that variation persists according to sector and locale. As

Jessop (2012) notes, whilst neo-liberalism has attained global ecosystemic dominance, its consequences are unevenly spread, with the persistence of different types of national mediation. In terms of global value chains, low cost production in some locales may undermine higher value added production paradigms elsewhere, and in others help to shore them up. The way in which the different trends are inter-related is outlined in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Reconfiguration and regulation of supply chains and HR practices



Conclusions

Although the intensification of the crisis from 2008 onwards may have been the direct response to the neo-liberal reforms which flowed from its original onset in the 1970s, its consequences led to further strengthening the hand of highly mobile and uncommitted investors following on from lavish state bailouts of the financial services industry, and a blind rush towards quantitative easing that saw trillions conjured out of the air, and just as mysteriously vanish again. All of these developments have greatly strengthened the hands of owners and those leveraging highly fungible assets; this grouping are far removed from traditional rentiers, and Sovereign Wealth Funds, the overseas investment arms of national governments, have been added to their ranks (Wood 2013). Although the global investor ecosystem is an undeniably diverse one, many have little commitment to any industry or locale, which is particularly bad news for workers, who do not enjoy the same mobility as is the case for capital or production processes.

The financial strategies undertaken mean that many of the processes highlighted within this chapter have been greatly accelerated. Even where firms are seeking to embrace a high quality paradigm, trends such as outsourcing represent a weakening of the cognitive capabilities of organization, reflecting the cumulative knowledge and understanding of groupings of employees working closely together; hence, they may have negative consequences for firms seeking advantage on the basis of quality or incremental innovation (Aoki 2010). Moreover, outsourcing is one of the main mechanisms driving precarity: this constitutes part and parcel of a move away from relational and toward ever-more transactional employment relationships, with some workers being regarded as core to the business function, and others as peripheral, reflected in changes to conditions of service and job security (Kalleberg 2009). The focus on numerical flexibility through outsourcing down supply chains can lead to unintended outcomes and costs; the monitoring of contingent labour and outsourced work further down supply chains is necessary if reputational scandals are to be avoided and quality upheld (c.f. Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Dibben et al 2016).

Yet, there are significant counter-pressures, and potential alternatives to this low road scenario: consumers have exerted some degree of influence on the practices of a number of high profile firms. Meanwhile, major coordinated markets such as Germany and Scandinavia have revitalised since the shocks of 2008, and in contrast to the period of neo-liberal triumphalism in the 1990s and early 2000s, their convergence with liberal market, shareholder dominant models no longer seems inevitable or likely. Further afield, the fastest growing emerging markets are generally distinguished by not following the liberal market model. This does not mean that they are necessarily associated with high labour standards, but rather that there is a capacity and appetite for regulation that is absent in the liberal markets. Therefore, the lessons from the most recent turn of the long crisis suggest that the patterns identified in much of the existing literature on HRM and value chains – that of contingent contracting and worsening labour standards – may not necessarily represent the inevitable global norm.

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