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Guest Editorial: Developing Ideas and Concepts in Teamwork Research: Where do we go from here?

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Abstract

Purpose – This editorial seeks to explore changes in both teamwork and developments in teamwork research over the last decade.

Design/methodology/approach – The editorial review importantly focuses on the key debates that emerge from the papers covered in this special issue.

Findings – A review of the papers in this special issue as well as historical analysis of teamwork research, indicates that whilst traditionally, analysis of teamwork was embedded in a manufacturing archetype, much of the contemporary research on teamwork is centred on service sector work where issues of cultural diversity, customer service, and lack of normative integration or task interdependence are increasingly apparent. This editorial suggests that we need to take account of the expansion of the service sector when attempting to conceptualise teamwork and the challenges that collective forms of working in such an environment bring.

Originality/value – This editorial and the special issue more generally, provides an important contribution to the development of understanding of how changes in the workplace have had an impact on organisational and academic interest in teamwork.

Keywords – Teamwork, Service Sector, Team Dimensions Model, Globalisation

Introduction

Groups and teams have traditionally been a major focal point of psychological and sociological theory and research. An understanding of groups is necessary for almost every analysis of social behaviour, including, leadership, majority-minority relations, status, role differentiation and socialisation (Levine and Moreland, 1990). Furthermore, small groups provide important contexts within which other behaviours occur e.g. attraction, aggression and altruism (Batson, 1998; Geen, 1998). At a functional level, people spend much of their lives in collectives of some kind; e.g. families, school classes and sports teams, and these groups provide members with vital material and psychological resources.

The use of teams and workgroups within organisations rapidly increased within the Western industrialised world (Waterson *et al.*, 1999). The rise of quality circles in the UK in the 1980s and the subsequent prevalence of self-managing teams have come to embody this movement in terms of work organisation. This transition was predominantly a response to lack of flexibility in more Taylorised forms of work, which led to decreased competitive ability. Teamwork was primarily introduced in order to find a more effective way to recruit and better utilise employees to achieve organisational goals. Teamworking was also viewed to fulfil the needs of employees for control over their work environment (Doorewaard *et al.*, 2002).

Teamwork is frequently described amongst the package of practices included in Human Resource Management (HRM). Indeed, the message behind the move from traditional personnel management to an HRM agenda was principled on the notion that Western employers should copy the Japanese approach by integrating flexible production and quality management practices with related employment practices. These include the development of a workforce willing and able to learn new skills and an emphasis on teamworking (Sisson, 1993). Teamwork was seen as allowing individual workers to share their knowledge and skills and develop them in a way that enhanced economic success. Teamwork was not only perceived as being able to help the firm's achievement, but also to ensure employment security (West, 1994). Modern management 'fads and fashions' such as business process re-engineering (BPR), total quality management (TQM), lean production, socio-technical approaches and HRM,

all support the core principles of team based work (Benders and van Hootegeem, 1999; Womack *et al.*, 1990).

Consequently, teamworking research has a long and established history. In 1997, academics with an interest in teamwork started to come together to discuss the key issues around teamwork with the first *International Workshop on Teamwork* (IWOT) in Nottingham. One of the outcomes of this first workshop was an edited collection on the subject (Proctor and Mueller, 2000) which has served, for many years, as a significant resource for both academics and students. However, returning to Proctor and Mueller's text, eight out of the ten empirical chapters were focused on manufacturing organisations. This special issue has materialized from the 14th IWOT and as the profile of papers in this collection demonstrates, the focus on teamwork research has moved beyond a focus on manufacturing environments to an overwhelming concern with the practice of teamwork in the service sector. Whilst Proctor and Mueller's collection is invaluable to those studying teamwork, the papers presented does not reflect the reality of teamwork today – with the demise, or at least diminishment, of manufacturing in most Western contexts. Yet, much of the traditional teamwork research is still drawn from two discernable traditions – sociotechnical systems theory and the Japanese model – both of which are underpinned by an identical managerial logic, that is, to use teams to improve productivity and manage performance in the production sector. As such, and based on the research in this special edition on teamworking, such an approach may not be as relevant in the current environment.

Despite much of the teamwork research on the manufacturing sector in the late 1990s and early 2000s focusing on normative integration, there is little evidence that teamwork in a service sector context either improves performance or normative values and behaviours. Baldry *et al.* (1998) found, from their study of teamwork in the finance sector, that teams not only failed to produce job enrichment, but led to routinisation and controlled the work process – so much so that they labelled the process 'Team Taylorism' to illustrate the low levels of job satisfaction and the tight physical and technological surveillance. In Baldry *et al.*'s study there was visible conflict in the workplace and not the idealised harmony that the HRM agenda would wish to portray. Furthermore, in their examination of teamworking in a

pharmaceutical sales force, Lloyd and Newell (2000) found if evaluated against the standard list of practices and objectives described in the literature, teamwork for this group of workers increased neither flexibility nor commitment. There was also little evidence that it increased internal discipline or performance levels.

Whilst it could be argued that these examples provide limited evidence for effective teamwork in the service sector, it could also be argued that many existing methods of examination or conceptualisation of teamwork may not be appropriate for the analysis of service sector work. Yet, this may not be the full picture. Returning to Proctor and Mueller's (2000) edited collection on teamwork, one of the chapters included in this collection (Findlay *et al.*, 2000a) provided an analysis of teamwork in the Scottish Spirits Industry using the Team Dimensions Model (Thompson and Wallace, 1996) to understand the relationship between managerial objectives for teamwork and the reality experienced by employees (see Figure 1). This model – without any prompting from the editors – has emerged as a central feature of many of the papers discussed within this edition (with the exception of the papers by Valsecchi *et al.* and Au and Marks). Moreover, an adapted version of this model has been provided by one set of authors (Richards *et al.*) suggesting that at least conceptualisation of teamwork can endure and develop, even if teamwork practice has fundamentally altered. Richards *et al.*'s paper, provides an ethnographic study looking at the existence of teamwork in the hospitality industry. Whilst, not included within traditional conceptualisations of teamwork, in their study, customer service was seen as key to teamwork initiatives (whether it could be articulated collectively is a moot point).

INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE

Hence, as the introductory section of the paper in this issue by Richards *et al.* notes, teamwork can and does exist without the traditional sociotechnical or Japanisation experience. Yet, the increasing prominence of service sector work is not the only change in the nature of work and the nature of collective work organization over the past decade or so. The composition of the workforce is also shifting. As well as an ever increasing proportion of women in the workforce (Bradley *et al.*, 2000), employees are more likely than ever to work in countries other than the one in which they were born (Noon and Blyton, 2006). In the UK alone, there are now over

600,000 employees from new EU member states. Within this special issue, Shaun Ryan, importantly, discusses the significance of global mobility, focusing on migrant communities in Australia and the role of ethnic networks in low-skilled employment. He shows that without the ability of service sector work to allow the development of the technical and governance aspects of teamwork that ethnic networks are used to provide normative integration (and to some extent, a form of coercive control) of the workforce. Moreover, Ryan's contribution also discusses issues of gender in terms of the division of labour, particularly with women being given stereotypically 'light' and customer-facing work. Such contributions are central to the development of teamwork research. Whilst there is extensive research on for example, knowledge diversity (e.g. Liang *et al.*, 2007) or functional diversity (e.g. Cronin *et al.*, 2007), there is very little literature that covers demographic diversity, and that which does, tends to amalgamate demographic diversity with, for example, functional diversity (Gratton *et al.*, 2007) or examines diversity as separate from other team process (e.g. Balkundi *et al.*, 2007).

Another result of increased mobility and globalisation of employment is the location of work. Again, as a result of customer expectations, some organisations are modifying their existing co-located team arrangements in preference to those described as 'virtual' (Herzog, 2001). Virtual teams allow geographical dispersed employees to work across time, space, and organisational boundaries with links strengthened by the use of information technology (Powell *et al.*, 2004). Using this technology, team members who are separated by geographically, are able to work together across organisational boundaries (Hoyt, 2000). Employees can participate in multiple projects without relocation or without high levels of spending on travel and accommodation (Yukl, 2002). Au and Marks's paper within this special issue focuses on the challenges of virtual working and not only the technical challenges that this leads to but the cultural implications of such working arrangements.

Valsecchi *et al.*'s contribution also discusses new forms of work organisation that have purportedly adopted teamwork practices with the examination of two tele-nursing call centre programmes. Whilst call centres have often been the focus of discussions on new forms of work organisation being antagonistic to teamwork (e.g. van den Broek *et al.*, 2004), and the cornerstone of the 'teams without teamwork'

debate, Valsecchi *et al.*, found that despite the problems of weak team infrastructure, that knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer were facilitated within and between teams.

Two further papers complete this special edition on teamworking. Both are similar in that they both follow a mainstream managerialist agenda, yet also help further advance, in different ways, the work based around Thompson and Wallace's (1996) Team Dimensions Model, through relatively unique, under-conceptualised and under-researched forms of teamworking. In the case of Rolfsen *et al.*'s paper we see an attempt to wider the validity of the Team Dimensions Model through an in-depth case study of teamworking in the context of manufacturing and Total Productive Maintenance (TPM). In this instance the success of a previously problematic TPM initiative is attributed to the organisation allowing TPM teams a high level of self-governance.

With Hagemann *et al.*'s paper we get to see into the world of perhaps the most important form of teamworking, that is, teamworking that relates to life and death situations. In other words, here is a study where quality standards and error prevention truly are fundamental features of teamworking. In this study the focus is on High Responsibility Teams (HRTs), such as, anaesthetists, police workers and fire fighters. Importantly, as Hagemann *et al.* quite rightly point out, there are times when we need to go beyond viewing teams as part of the management by stress agenda and instead be open to viewing teams as an important means by which both team members and managers of teams, manage stress. Taken together, the final two papers help further the view that teamworking continues to be inherently complex and diverse and that there continues to ample opportunity for more research to be done on teamworking.

Conclusions

It appears, from this special issue, that three factors are becoming increasingly prominent in teams and teamwork research; customer service, virtuality and diversity. The focus being whether teamwork models can be transferred or adapted to service based industries.

In a review of interdisciplinary perspectives on the organisation of work, Batt and Doellgast (2004) argue that the way to develop more inclusive and coherent understandings of teamwork is to increase awareness and learning across disciplines and theoretical traditions. The papers within this collection are varied in coming from both labour process oriented accounts (Ryan, Valsecchi *et al.*, and Richards *et al.*), social psychology (Au and Marks) and more mainstream psychological/managerialist positions (Hagemann *et al.*, and Rolfsen *et al.*). Most of these papers were developed and informed by discussion between each other and between disciplines. Batt and Doellgast (2004) suggested that psychological researchers would benefit from the scepticism found in the critical literature on teams, and that the critical literature would benefit from input from psychologists who are trained at defining and measuring central concepts more precisely and such an exchange between disciplines has strengthened the contributions within this special issue.

What we can see in particular, is where disciplines have started to overlap is in the use of broader frameworks to examine dimensions of teamwork, specifically Thompson and Wallace's (1996) discussion of the technical, governance and normative components of teamwork. This framework includes the clarity of definition of central concepts from a psychological tradition, particularly in discussions about team competencies, yet acknowledges the impact of context on the organisation and the experience of work from a more sociologically informed view (Batt and Doellgast, 2002).

Finally, we would like to thank you for reading this special issue of Employee Relations and hope it becomes a useful contribution to the contemporary teamwork debate.

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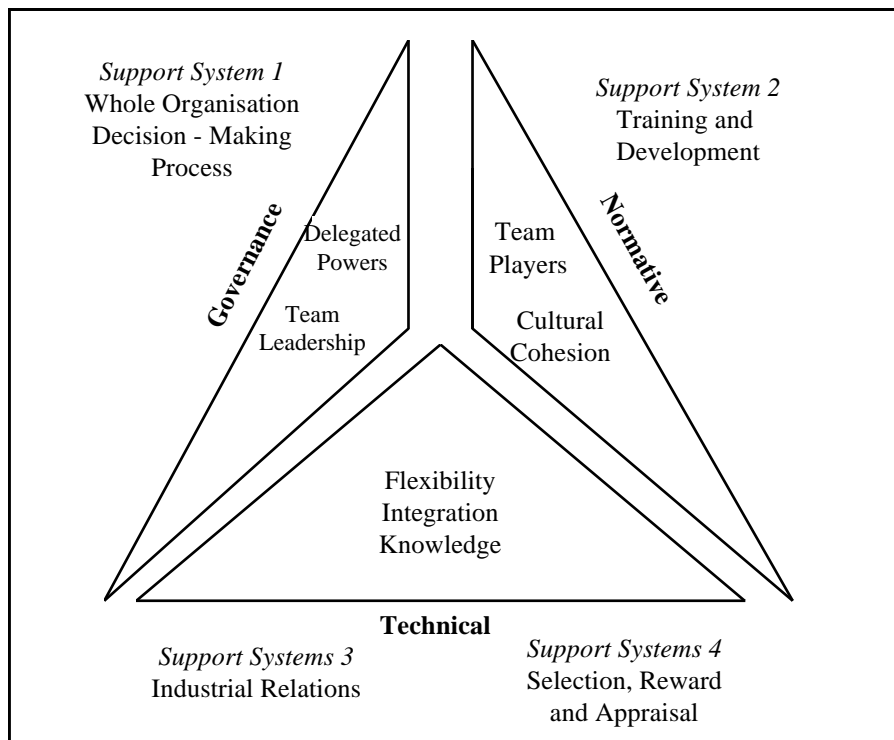


Figure 1: The Team Dimensions Model (Thompson and Wallace, 1996; Findlay *et al.*, 2000a, 2000b)