



Strategic HRM: Research and Practice in Ireland

**Edited by
Brian Harney and Kathy Monks**

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Introduction

Brian Harney and Kathy Monks

This brief introduction will set the context for this book while also providing an overview of the various chapters. It is now some fifteen years since Roche et al.'s (1998) edited volume explored strategic human resource management (SHRM) in Ireland from a research-based perspective. The intervening years have seen a significant increase in SHRM research by Irish scholars, coupled with the proliferation of specialist undergraduate and masters' level SHRM programmes (Carbery et al., 2013). In terms of the human resource (HR) profession in Ireland, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has witnessed a dramatic 80 per cent increase in membership since the 1980s. These developments highlight the necessity for continuous theoretical reflection and empirical scrutiny of SHRM practice. The purpose of this book is to provide an integrated overview of both theory and evidence of the practice of strategic HRM in an Irish context. Broadly understood, SHRM involves a focus on linking human resource management (HRM) to business strategy, designing high performance work systems (HPWSs) and adding value through good people management in an attempt to gain sustained competitive advantage (Boselie, 2010; Delery and Doty, 1996). At the same time, SHRM is subject to multiple interpretations and sometimes contested meanings. This book therefore aims to provide empirically informed insights to illuminate current thinking around SHRM, including a critical analysis of its relevance, application and development in an Irish context. Reflecting the richness, diversity and breadth

of SHRM expertise in Ireland, the book draws on the insights of twenty-one contributors representing some nine different institutions. In so doing, we believe it will prove an invaluable resource for undergraduates specialising in SHRM and masters' students requiring up-to-date knowledge about people management practices and processes, while also serving as a reflective resource for experienced executives.

Why Strategic HRM and Why Now?

It is worth drawing attention to why the task of examining SHRM in an Irish context is important and why it holds particular relevance at the current time. First is the reality that the evaluation of SHRM takes place in the context of a dramatically altered economic landscape. Commentary on the decline of the Irish economy in what has been termed 'the Great Recession' (Roche and Teague, 2013) is well rehearsed. Ireland experienced the largest compound decline in gross national product (GNP) of any industrialised economy over the 2007–2010 period (Kinsella, 2012). As a result, Ireland once again finds itself faced with the challenge articulated by pioneering Taoiseach Seán Lemass 60 years ago of ensuring the 'economic foundation of independence'. Ireland has once more returned to a labour surplus economy representing a dramatic reversal of fortunes from the 'Celtic Tiger' era, which had been characterised by an unprecedented requirement for workers and a growing reliance on immigrant labour (Turner, 2010). Specifically in employment terms, Ireland has gone from having a laudable unemployment rate of 4.6 per cent in 2007 to a rate of 14.8 per cent in 2012, the third highest unemployment rate in the Euro area, eclipsed only by Spain (21.6 per cent) and Greece (17.7 per cent) (Forfás, 2012). This reality, and the associated collapse of national level social partnership, represents a challenging economic and social backdrop for SHRM. From a HR perspective, the recession has significantly altered the basis of recruitment, the nature of pay decisions and remuneration levels, channels of employee voice and levels of employee morale. HR professionals have had to develop expertise in dealing with employee exit and downsizing decisions. In the public sector, HR professionals have had to confront the challenges presented by early retirement schemes, recruitment embargoes and third-party pressure for reform. This provides a timely reminder

of the significant challenges that emanate from the contextual and institutional environment in which SHRM is enacted (Gunnigle, 1998). However, it is also important to recognise arguments that the 1980s' recession and subsequent recovery served as a key catalyst for the reinvention and renewal of HRM in Ireland (Gunnigle et al., 1994; Roche et al., 1998: 17). Recent commentary notes that a 'new people management agenda' could emerge from the context of the current recession (Roche and Teague, 2013). National survey findings highlight a greater willingness by employees to take on more responsibility, to innovate and to up-skill in addition to a greater demand for involvement in decision-making (O'Connell et al., 2010: 9). The unfolding economic and social circumstances and associated challenges and opportunities highlight the importance of reassessing the status of SHRM in an Irish context.

A second reason for exploring SHRM in Ireland concerns the growing recognition that the management of people is of strategic significance to success (Barney, 1991). Indeed, a burgeoning stream of international evidence over the last two decades has highlighted the impact that SHRM can have in shaping both organisational performance (Huselid, 1995) and employee outcomes (Takeuchi et al., 2009). As we outline in **Chapter 1**, Irish contributions have likewise evolved from exploring the nature of HRM in Irish organisations to examining its viability and assessing its contribution to key organisational and employee outcomes (Monks, 1992; Roche, 1999; Guthrie et al., 2009; Conway and Monks, 2009). The importance of developing human capital has also been at the forefront of government policy. Since the 1960s, Ireland has invested heavily in education as a pathway to future economic and social prosperity. By the 1980s, Ireland was a pioneer in purposefully drawing on this human capital base to position itself as an attractive location for foreign direct investment. A key exemplar was the Industrial Development Authority's 'We're young Europeans' campaign, which publicised Ireland's highly educated, bright and youthful workforce (MacSharry and White, 2000). Structural funds from Europe during the 1980s and economic growth in the 1990s led to increased investment in human resources (Kirby, 2010). Today, agencies such as Science Foundation Ireland assert that 'Ireland's success on the world stage cannot be based on low labour costs or mineral resources; it must be based on our human resources and our science' (Science Foundation Ireland, 2012: 8). A key

differentiator in attracting foreign MNCs to Ireland has been this highly educated and skilled workforce. This has invited something of a reinforcing cycle as many of these firms, from the early arrival of Pfizer and Intel, through to the recent additions of Google and LinkedIn, are at the leading edge in terms of the development and diffusion of SHRM practice.

The changing economic circumstances and importance of developing human capital for both organisations and national competitiveness renders the exploration of strategic HRM in Ireland an important task. Allied to this is the necessity of exploring the relevance and impact of key conceptual developments in SHRM. There has long been debate over the extent of diffusion of HRM in an Irish context, evident in a discourse of 'new orders' and the 'continuity of tradition and change' (Foley and Gunnigle, 1995; Gunnigle et al., 1994; Turner and Morley, 1995). It is important to continue and update such conversations. The idea of assessing key conceptual developments via empirical scrutiny forms the core of the contemporary movement for so-called 'evidence-based HR' (EBHR). EBHR emphasises the critical importance of ensuring that HR decision-making takes place in the context of the best and most recent research evidence available (Rousseau and Barends, 2011). In bringing together leading experts in SHRM each chapter in this book carefully considers global developments and debates before specifically examining how Irish evidence reflects these developments and contributes to these debates. This is an important task in ensuring that the wealth of recent research evidence in Ireland about how HR operates and has most impact (e.g. Carbery et al., 2013) is brought to bear to inform analysis. This opens up important questions concerning the extent to which the assumptions and key arguments of SHRM, largely US in origin and based on particular types of organisations (e.g. large, private sector), can, or indeed should, hold universal relevance (Batt and Banerjee, 2012; Brewster, 2007). Both extensive global competition and a substantial MNC presence have undoubtedly shaped the nature of SHRM in Ireland. Yet, questions remain concerning the specificity of SHRM in an Irish context. Indeed, one commentator has argued that 'maybe it is time we learned to import more discerningly across the whole spectrum of ideas, societal no less than economic, and had the confidence to be more makers than takers in getting the best out of ourselves' (Lee, 2002: 300). Debate also abounds

about the relevance of SHRM across different categories of workers both within and across organisational boundaries (Lepak and Snell, 2002; Marchington et al., 2004). Comparisons of international developments in the field with Irish research evidence serves as one basis to contribute to these debates.

Overall, the impact of the current economic and social context, the prospective role of SHRM in enhancing performance and competitiveness, and the importance of assessing the relevance of conceptual developments all provide a clear rationale for exploring SHRM in Ireland. Critically, these are not mutually exclusive, with developments in one domain shaping and reinforcing those in another. The current economic crisis has directed attention to the importance of restoring national competitiveness so that human capital considerations have taken on renewed significance. Associated commentary has indicated a complex terrain including an increasingly formally educated workforce, but below European averages in terms of lifelong learning (Forfás, 2012). Similarly, while Ireland continues to attract leading foreign multinational corporations (MNCs), there are also skills shortages in key growth and knowledge-based sectors (Shanks et al., 2013). Akin to the 1980s, recessionary circumstances have also fostered conceptual developments founded on how best to leverage the potential of talent. Concepts such as 'employee engagement' have emerged as important in countering potential negative effects on productivity and performance with reference made to 'the commitment, motivation, ideas and creativity of all employees as key elements in rebuilding a vibrant and competitive economy and a high-performing public service' (Fallon-Byrne, 2010: 2). Likewise, there is growing recognition of the importance of 'innovations in the organisation of work' as a basis for fostering economic recovery (Watson et al., 2010: 24).

Employee experiences have also come to the fore in recent times, not only in understanding the impact of the economic downturn, but also in terms of changing expectations. Employees are now more educated and technologically versed, with noted generational differences suggested with respect to demands in terms of career paths and development provisions (Hewlett et al., 2010). All the while, dedicated attention is required to the nature of the psychological contract employees hold with the organisation, and the important role that line managers play in balancing employee expectations with employer intentions (McDermott et al., 2013).

These changes suggest an ever-broadening range of competencies, challenges and depth of knowledge required of HR professionals (cf. Sheehan, 2002). In this vein it is clear that considering the impact of the current economic context, appreciating the prospective contribution of SHRM to enhanced performance and assessing conceptual developments are of equal and related importance in the field of SHRM. Reflecting this line of argument, the centenary CIPD conference held in April 2013 focused on three interrelated themes: retaining talent when the upturn comes, managing employee expectations and rebuilding trust. Overall, there is a consensus that Ireland's economic fortunes are inextricably bound to the management of people and their ideas at an individual, workplace and national level (Kakabadse and Moore, 2002; McWilliams, 2012). This in turn reinforces the imperative of a strategic approach to the development and nurturing of human resources as a critical foundation for success. The next section outlines how each chapter in this book sets out to provide insights in this regard.

Overview of Contributions

Progress

This book is structured around four key sections. The first section comprises two chapters which examine the broad theme of *Progress* in research and understanding of SHRM in Ireland. **Chapter 1**, by Harney, Heffernan and Monks, offers an historical overview of the emergence of HRM in Ireland before examining contemporary developments and associated Irish evidence with respect to the development of SHRM and the relationship between SHRM and performance. Key empirical developments highlighted include the gradual incorporation of employee perspectives and a better understanding of the key intermediary variables shaping the SHRM-performance linkage. Following this broad overview, **Chapter 2**, by Roche, provides a review of how HRM professionals and international scholars have considered the effects of recessions on SHRM. The chapter then draws on findings from extensive Irish research examining the impact of the recession on both private and public sector organisations. These results highlight a leaner, somewhat more influential HR function with evidence of a dual deployment of HRM practices to balance retrenchment with efforts at maintaining workforce motivation and commitment. Taken together, these two

chapters provide a broad understanding of the state of play of SHRM in both steady state and recessionary circumstances, thereby setting the foundation for chapters that examine more specific HR practice.

Practice

The second section of the book examines developments in strategic HRM in terms of four specific domains of *Practice*. **Chapter 3**, by Collings, explores the nascent area of talent management (TM) by highlighting five key streams or waves of development. The chapter then examines evidence on the content, operation and impact of TM from the limited pool of research that has been conducted in an Irish context. While challenges remain, clearly TM is an area of growing significance; indeed the subtitle poses the question 'a new era for HRM?' **Chapter 4**, by Cullinane and Dundon, explores the domain of employee voice, which is noted as an enduring process, inherent to the employment relationship. This chapter documents the demand for employee voice, before unpacking its meaning and the key basis by which employee voice can be evaluated. Turning to the Irish evidence, Cullinane and Dundon highlight a tendency for more pronounced patterns of direct and non-union forms of voice, coupled with growing employer resistance to institutional and European attempts to reframe the dynamics of employee voice.

Chapter 5, by Gunnigle, Turner, Lavelle and McDonnell, examines the issue of pay and performance management in the context of MNCs, typically viewed as market leaders and innovators in this domain. The chapter begins with an overview of key debates in relation to the emergence, content and purpose of performance management systems before drawing on survey evidence from MNCs in Ireland to assess the nature of pay and performance systems in place. The findings highlight ownership and sector as key determinants of the types of systems in place, in addition to variances in application between occupational groups. **Chapter 6**, by Gubbins and Kennedy, takes on the critical domains of learning and knowledge. Five key learning orientations are presented with each one illustrated by relevant Irish research evidence. Moving to knowledge, the chapter deconstructs key definitions before providing an overview of recent Irish research which has examined key outcomes of knowledge processes. Overall, the chapter makes

clear that the knowledge embedded in people and mastery of how that knowledge is shared and retained are of vital consideration in realising individual and organisational potential.

While this section on HR practice encompassing talent, employee voice, pay and performance, and knowledge and learning presents them in a standalone fashion, in reality they are likely to operate more like bundles which can either serve to be 'mutually reinforcing' or operate as 'deadly combinations' (Becker et al., 1997: 43; Monks and Loughnane, 2006: 1926). The task of the HR manager is to understand the detail of how each practice operates, but also to interpret this from the perspective of the HR system as a whole.

Context

Section 3 continues the empirical conversation by examining SHRM in *Context*. This follows a growing recognition that SHRM originated from a limited US, private sector, large-firm standpoint so key findings may not generalise across national contexts, or to the majority of the working population, including those operating in the context of small firms or the public and non-profit sectors (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010; Batt and Banerjee, 2012). By the same token, some researchers have questioned the relevance of certain principles of SHRM when applied to an increasingly educated and knowledge-centric workforce (Chasserio and Legault, 2009). This section, therefore, explores the meaning and operation of SHRM in varying contexts.

Chapter 7, by Lavelle, McDonnell and Gunnigle, examines the topic of international HRM by exploring the role and significance of MNCs. Specifically, the chapter offers an overview of theoretical debates concerning country-of-origin versus host-country effects. The chapter then explores how this debate has been played out in an Irish context before considering more recent empirical evidence relating to the role of MNCs in Ireland. **Chapter 8**, by Harney and Nolan, moves the discussion to the often neglected context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This chapter presents some key characteristics of SMEs before assessing the applicability of extant SHRM theory to this context. Turning to empirical evidence, the chapter draws on both national and organisational level findings to offer a more nuanced understanding of the nature of HRM in Irish SMEs.

Chapter 9, by Monks, Conway, Kelly and Fu, engages with the significant area of knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs). Having delineated the key concepts of knowledge work and knowledge workers, this chapter provides an overview of recent research. The chapter then offers a multi-layered overview of Irish research, examining KIFs at the level of industry, firm and employees. In so doing, the chapter highlights complexities in terms of HRM systems deployed and subsequent employee outcomes. The final chapter on context is **Chapter 10**, by McDermott and Keating, which examines HRM in healthcare, specifically the hospital sector. This chapter highlights the challenges and constraints that characterise HRM in this context before exploring recent evidence on the relationship between HR practices and performance in healthcare settings. Throughout the chapter, McDermott and Keating draw on their own research to illuminate the complexities of HR in the context of multiple, and sometimes competing, stakeholder demands.

These four chapters illustrate that while the overall principles of SHRM may hold some universal relevance, the specifics of how SHRM actually operates is likely to be heavily shaped by the immediate context in which the organisation is operating. These chapters also indicate how SHRM in each of the contexts explored is subject to its own tensions, including those of convergence versus divergence, formality versus informality, generalist versus specialist and the competing requirements of multiple stakeholders. In addition, they highlight how HRM decision-makers will need to be attentive to broader institutional backdrops in the form of legislation and wider institutional networks (Curran and Quinn, 2012; McLaughlin, 2013).

Challenges

The final section of the book picks up the themes of complexity and tension with two chapters which examine *Challenges* for SHRM. **Chapter 11**, by Mulhall, explores careers and career development. Here it is clear that traditional conceptions of career have been replaced by a variety of new career types and this will have differing implications in terms of HR understanding. The Irish evidence presented illustrates novel approaches to up-skilling and developing learning networks. In **Chapter 12**, Cushen and Harney explore the reasons why SHRM may not always work in

the ways originally intended or expected. In particular, they focus on neglected issues including financialization and the inherent tensions of the employment relationship. Irish evidence is used to support the argument providing a useful empirical counter to overly simplistic claims assuming automatic benefits or outcomes as a result of SHRM interventions. Finally, in the conclusion Monks and Harney explore some key dilemmas likely to inform future theoretical and empirical conversations.

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