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## Prospective on Human Resources Management in Startups

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# Prospective on Human Resources Management in Startups

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**Abstract:** Human resources management (HRM) is interested in studying factors and best practices to manage the workforce to reach maximum efficiency. However, HRM models for large organizations are not applicable to startups. The startup workforce lives in a different environment and constraints that should be dealt with differently. In addition, the inherent uncertainty in the startup nature places implications and changes in the workforce, which need different HRM approaches. Most of the previous HRM researches have been focusing on studying large firms despite the impact on startups on economies and job creation. In this paper, a literature review is given on startups and their differences for big corporates, in addition to the current startup HRM models. As entrepreneurial activity is not limited to startups, HRM model for corporate entrepreneurship is discussed. Despite the rise of interest in startup HRM, a more rigorous and comprehensive startup HRM model is missing.

**Keywords:** Human Resources Management, HRM, Startups, Entrepreneurial Orientation, Entrepreneurial Activity.

## 1 Introduction

Human resources are of great importance not only for established organizations but also for startup businesses. Human Capital is the primary catalytic factor on which business growth is based. Moreover, product quality, firm financial performance, and sustainability are directly dependent on individual workers and their relationships with each other (Hendry & Pettigrew, 1990). Human resources management (HRM) field is focused on studying factors and on optimizing over the workforce to have maximum business efficiency. HRM focuses on areas such as selection, recruitment, strategic allocation of human resources, employees' development, and organizational environment to create synergy between employee's efforts and business goals (Dabić, Ortiz-De-Urbina-Criado, & Romero-Martínez, 2011; Farnham, 2010; Schweiger, David, William, 1989)

Startups have large impact on the economy and job creation (Baumol & Strom, 2007). However, most startups face a wide range of problems in both financial and human resources. Furthermore, startups exist in a different environment that is full of uncertainty (Ries, 2011). These conditions impose different goals for the startup and different methods of reaching these goals. Human capital is one of the early and most important resources, on which a

startup depends, at the beginning. Therefore, optimizing over the startup workforce is crucial for the strategic planning and survival of startups (Scholtes and Peter, 1988)

While established businesses focus on the execution of known business models, startups create new business models through testing and pivoting under an uncertain atmosphere. This difference creates a different atmosphere for the employee and hence requires different HRM approaches than those used for established businesses. According to the literature, most of HRM studies have been focusing on established organizations. After the year 2000, more studies began to emerge on this topic (Dabić, Ortiz-De-Urbina-Criado, & Martínez, 2011).

The goal of this paper is to provide a comprehensive review of different startup HRM. The first section provides a theoretical overview of human resources management, startups and their impact on the economy, and startups environment implication on the workforce. The second section provides a review on startup HRM discussed in the literature in addition to human resources management for corporate entrepreneurship. We extend previous work in several important ways. First, discussing the development of the human resources systems research over time gives more insights on the progress has been made and where such progress is lacking. Second, we focus specifically on the system element of human resources management

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systems by assessing every aspect of HR systems research. Most reviews focus either broadly on the field of systems of human resources management and identify important themes such as human resource management implementation or mediating mechanisms in the HRM–performance relationship or on specific issues (Ahmad and Schroeder, 2003; Andreeva, Vanhala, Sergeeva, Ritala, Kianto, 2017; Ang, Bartram, McNeil, Leggat, Stanton, 2013; Arthur, 1992; Arthur, 1994; Arthur, 2011).

Below, we first provide a brief overview of human resource systems theory and then present our review showing how human resource systems research has developed over the past three decades. Our findings suggest two main and interrelated issues that have hampered research progress: the increasingly broad conceptualization and measurement of human resource systems and the lack of clarity on the human resource systems construct at different levels. We highlight areas of the impact of startups on economy. Also, we focus on communication and rewarding Systems; high-performance work systems for startups and corporate entrepreneurship and human resources management Models. Finally, we offer actionable suggestions on how to advance human resource systems research.

## 2 Theoretical Backgrounds

### 2.1 Human Resource Management (HRM)

Human capital is one of the most crucial assets that any business relies upon. Human resources have been considered the key reason for the success or failure of business (Foss & Laursen, 2012). Consequently, human resources management is concerned with optimizing the business workforce and aligning it with business goals to reach maximum performance (Storey, 1992; Storey, 2007; Storey, Wright, Ulrich, 2009; Yates and Douglas, 1987). This is achieved through means of optimization in the whole processes of selection, recruitment, training, employees' development, rewarding systems, and employees' relationships (Dabić, Ortiz-De-Urbina-Criado, & Romero-Martínez, 2011). These optimizations should result in aligning the human workforce with business goals while satisfying employees' needs. HRM is different from personnel management in that the latter deals with employers' issues irrespective of the whole organization. In other words, HRM has a wider scope than personnel management.

Strategic HRM equips firms with additional tools to adapt and stay ahead in a competitive market environment. As it is a comprehensive approach to manage the organization, a strong correlation exists between HRM and business financial performance (Foss & Laursen, 2012). As startups are meant to grow, they need HRM systems as much as corporates, but with a different perspective that considers the startups' different nature.

### 2.2 Startups

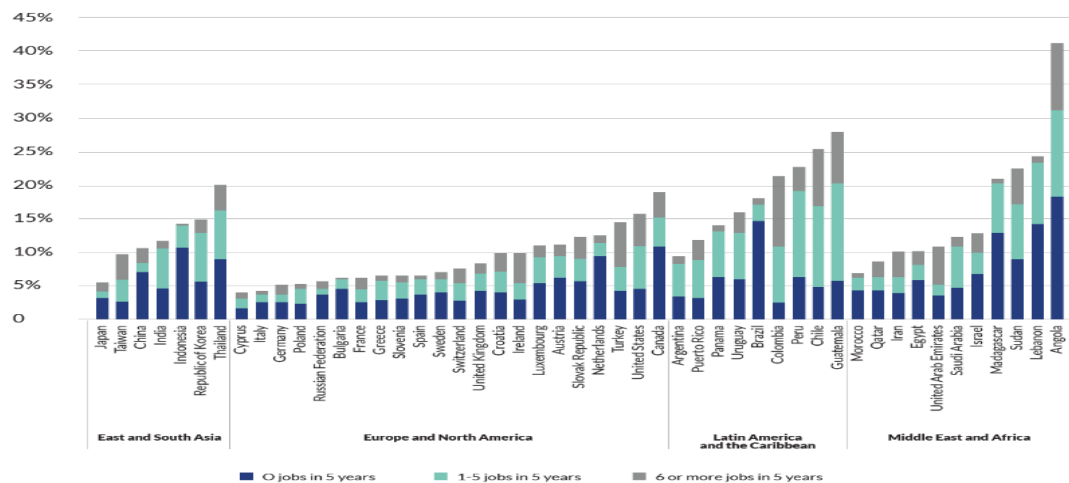
According to Steve Blank, “A startup is an organization formed to search for a repeatable and scalable business model” (Blank, 2010). The business model is simply how a business makes money. The business model parts are; defining the product or service, the target customers, customer relationships, distribution channels, key activities, key resources, key partners, cost structure, and revenue streams (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2013). While big firms already know these aspects and their daily activities revolve around executing them, startups delve into the uncertain world of business to discover and build these parts. Consequently, a startup cannot be considered a small version of big companies. While established organizations focus on the execution of a known business model, startups hypothesize, test, and iterate every day to reach a working business model in an uncertain environment. According to Eric Ries, “A startup is a human institution designed to create a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty” (Ries, 2011). Therefore, startups differ from large organizations in culture, performance indicators, and most importantly employees.

### 2.3 The Impact of Startups on Economy

Despite the small size of startups, compared to large businesses, startups have an indispensable role in the economic development of countries. According to GEM 2018 / 2019 global report, entrepreneurs self-reported their roles in creating new jobs and in contributing to the welfare of their societies, as shown in figure 1. In addition, 35% of entrepreneurs reported that the main reason for pursuing entrepreneurship is due to lack of work options (GEM, 2019). Therefore, entrepreneurship offers new job opportunities and job alternatives. In addition, startups can turn into giant multinational companies that have a large impact on the global economy such as Facebook, Alibaba, Google, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Airbnb, and Uber.

Startups are providing a new product or service. They do not replicate existing products, which is why they need to create new business models. These new business activities have a positive impact on the economy.

A study has proven the existence of a positive correlation between startups and GDP (Szarek & Piecuch, 2018). Moreover, the startup ecosystem provides a rich medium for youth to practice innovation. Therefore, understanding the factors of success of startups is crucial. As human resources are a core element in the success of any organization, human resources play a more vital role in startups due to the continuous shortage of resources and the high dependency on innovation. The following section describes the differences in the startup workforce that should be considered when thinking about Human resources management systems for startups.



**Fig. 1:** Levels of self-reported expectations from entrepreneurs for growth in job opportunity creation in the future (GEM, 2019).

#### 2.4 The Criticality of Human Capital in Startups

According to CB Insights, the top 3 reasons for startups failure are lack of market needs, running out of cash, and the team issues. However, based on researching more than 2,000 venture-backed companies that raised more than \$1 million, 75% of them to fail (Ghosh, 2012). Although having the required financial resources, they could not survive. In addition, the lack of market need is a failure from the team to do the required research. When looking at the startup failure reasons from a human resource point of view, 60 % of startup failure is due to human-based factors such as quality and efficiency, innovation, lack of focus, and strategy (Calderón, García, & Betancourt, 2018). This criticality of the human capital element in startup places high importance on developing HRM systems in order to minimize the chances of failure. However, much of the research is focused on HRM systems for big organizations. The following section discusses the differences in startups that require different HRM systems.

#### 2.5 How Startups Workforce is Different from Established Organization

Despite the attempts to generalize corporate HRM to small firms, startups possess many differences in the employee environment (Trice and Beyer, 1984; Trice and Beyer, 1993; Trice and Rites, 1988; Ury and William, 1993; Vancouver, 1996). The funding shortage, that startups face, may have an impact on job security inside startups. This lack of funding places pressures on employees of being replaced for the financial sustainability of the business. Therefore, a human workforce that faces this job security issues should be dealt with differently. In addition, startups are more vulnerable to pivoting and changing business models. Moreover, startups consist of a small number of

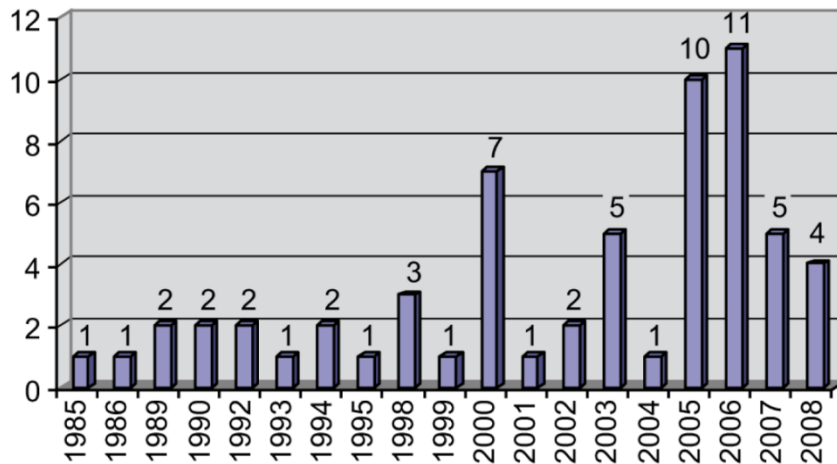
employees. These conditions create a different environment other than corporate environments.

Despite the business uncertainty, employees at startups feel more satisfied and engaged than large businesses (Gallup, Inc, 2019). Despite the relatively low pay in startups, it seems that it does not have an impact on job satisfaction. It was shown that “employees earning salaries in the top half of our data range reported similar levels of job satisfaction to those employees earning salaries in the bottom-half of our data range” (Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010). In addition, the employee feels more confidence and satisfaction when they have updated knowledge about the business state (TINYpulse, 2013). In startups, employees are more likely to know all business updates due to the smaller number. This open communication is not likely to be the case in big organizations. These changes show the difference in the startup workforce that imply the inapplicability of corporate HRM on startups.

#### 2.6 Startup Human Resource Management

Despite the evolvement of research on HRM and entrepreneurship, combining the two topics into one research is a recent phenomenon. HRM in startups has not been taken into researchers’ considerations seriously until the year 2000, as shown in figure 2. By analysis of 92 empirical research papers published on this topic, it was found that most of startups HRM researches investigate human resources management in general and corporate entrepreneurship. Previous studies focused on the whole firm by taking measures such as regression rates rather than a holistic study of startups and entrepreneurial behavior. Furthermore, there has been a huge focus on US firms and

high-tech sectors (Dabić, Ortiz-De-Urbina-Criado, & Romero-Martínez, 2011).



**Fig. 2:** Distributions of articles on startups HRM over time (Dabić, Ortiz-De-Urbina-Criado, & Romero-Martínez, 2011).

Despite the lack of a comprehensive model for HRM in startups, there are some separate studies that tackle this topic from different perspectives. This section provides a review of the proposed startup HRM practices, in addition to HRM for corporate entrepreneurship.

### 2.7 Formality and Informality Balance

Due to the small number of employees in startups, managers tend to use informal HR practices in order to establish personal and strong relationships with employees. This management style gives rise to a more fluid approach which consequently increases employees' satisfaction. However, this informality might be damaging in the long term. This informality has a negative impact on the strategic insights and planning. As startups grow, management must shift to a more formal HR approach in order to achieve this growth effectively. This shift from informality to formality creates tension in the workforce environment. This is one of the reasons behind the failure of applying formal HR practices on startup workforce. While informality stimulates satisfaction and formality stimulates tension, managers should find a balance between these two practices in order to prepare a workforce that is capable of achieving growth (Hayton, Hornsby, & Bloodgood, 2013).

### 2.8 Communication and Rewarding Systems

As HRM in big organizations tends to focus mainly on aligning employees with organizational needs, HRM in startups should also focus additionally on building relationships between employees and key stakeholder inside the startup. These kinds of relationships empower the flow of knowledge that is necessary for the innovation process. Moreover, open communication between employees and managers is crucial for stimulating entrepreneurial activity within small firms. As innovation is insensible part of the entrepreneurial activity, an intrinsic

rewarding system should be in place in order to motivate employees to be creative, which results in innovation promotion in the startup level (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2009; Cappelli and Keller, 2013; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Dunlop, 1958; Sheehy, 1995; Stamp, 1988)

### 2.9 High Commitment Work Systems on Startups

High commitment work systems (HCWS) are a set of HRM practices that were previously proposed for managing big organizations workforce. HCWS is mainly about increasing employees' involvement, investing in employee's development, training, promotions, and sharing the firm profit profits. It has been proven that big firms that utilize this approach have improved product quality, lower employee turnover, and enhanced employee morale. A study has been done aiming to measure the impact of HCWS practices on startups. The study measured 30 practices of HCWS and took the likelihood of IPO and the likelihood of firm failure as measures for the effectiveness of the HCWS practices. The study showed that applying HCWS practices is associated with an increased likelihood of IPO and a decreased likelihood of firm failure (Burton & O'Reilly, 2004).

### 2.10 High-performance Work Systems for Startups

High-performance work systems (HPWS) are a collection of HRM practices that emphasize self-managed teams, decentralized decision making, flexible work, open communication, and compensation system. This system is supported by a staffing criterion that can support this strategy. Research suggested that organizations adopting this strategy outperform others. However, previous scholars did not deeply examine the applicability of HPWS on startups. A new study argues that startups that utilize HPWS have a higher chance of experiencing higher levels



of growth, survival, development of capabilities, and goal achievement. While self-managed teams may not be preferable for startups managers, this practice can lead to more positive outcomes due to the autonomy and higher motivations resulting from these practices. In addition, decentralization of decision making will empower autonomy by delegating more control and power to employees (Bendickson, Muldoon, Liguori, & Midgett, 2017; Russo, Edward, Shoemaker, 1989; Smith and Hedrick, 1988; Stamp, 1978).

### 2.11 Corporate Entrepreneurship and HRM Models

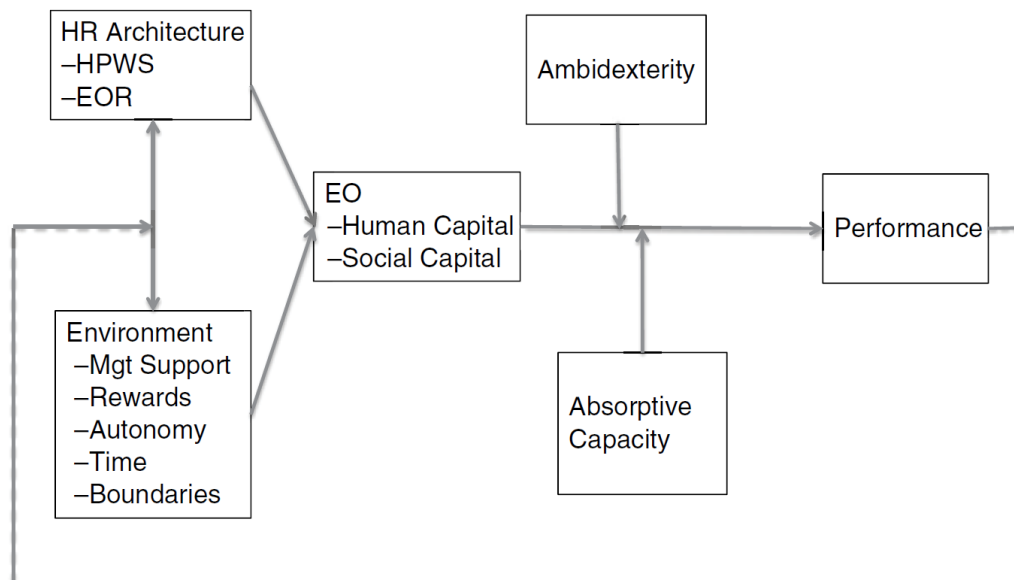
Established organizations focus on execution of existing business models, which in turn makes them bureaucratic, committed to serving the current customer needs, blind to new technologies, and hindered by their cost structure. However, startups tend to be more dynamic while trying to reach a sustainable business model by testing and iterations. For a big organization to have entrepreneurial activity inside, there must be some changes in the management strategy to support this change (AV, 1993; Ryde, 2013; Sánchez and Soriano, 2011; Scott, 1995; Starbuck and Milliken, 1988; Streufert and Swezey, 1986; Tsouras, 1992; Tsui, 1984).

Investment in HRM systems was proved to have a positive impact on innovation, which in turn boost the entrepreneurial activity with corporates. This book, (Hayton, Hornsby, & Bloodgood, 2013), gives comprehensive literature about the role of HRM in supporting the creating of entrepreneurial capabilities.

The review is based on the conceptual framework shown in

figure 3, which maps HRM factors that affect the entrepreneurial orientation (EO) of an organization. EO is measured in terms of Proactiveness, innovation, and risk-taking. According to literature, there are two factors affecting the entrepreneurial orientation (EO) of an organization: HR architecture and environmental factors (Hayton, Hornsby, & Bloodgood, 2013).

HR architecture is broken into 3 parts: HR systems, employment modes, and the employee-organization exchange relationship. HR systems are concerned with practices, work structure, and processes that maximize skills, flexibility, and commitment. The employment modes (full-time, part-time, short-term, long-term) should be specified carefully according to the strategic importance of the job. Long term contracts are efficient for strategically important jobs while short-term contracts are efficient for less strategically important jobs. The open social exchange between employees and organization enhances the transfer of firm-specific knowledge, which lay an important foundation for entrepreneurial learning (Hayton, Hornsby, & Bloodgood, 2013; Sackmann, 1992; Senge, 1990; Streufert and Streufert, 1978; Sullivan and Harper, 1996; Sulsky, Lorne, Day, 1992; VanMaanan and Barley, 1984; Willbern and York, 1984; Wuthnow and Witten, 1988). In addition to HR architecture, organizational leadership has an important influence on the entrepreneurial orientation within the organization (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977; Schein, 1990; Schein, 1988). Top management should support the EO to facilitate the implementation of ideas. The rewarding system is crucial to motivate employees (Hayton, Hornsby, Bloodgood, 2013; Walsh, 1988; Weick and Karl, 1995; Weisbord and Marvin, 1992). Autonomy will create an environment that supports innovation.



**Fig. 3:** An integrative model of the role of HRM in Corporate entrepreneurship process (Hayton, Hornsby, & Bloodgood, 2013).

In addition, the employees should perceive the availability of resources in order to focus on entrepreneurial activity. Finally, employees should realize the organization orientation towards entrepreneurship to have the momentum that accelerates innovation (Gospel and Sako, 2010; Greer, Schulten, Böhlke, 2013; Howell and Givan, 2011; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Quinn, 1988). Also, strategic leadership and decision making have been discussed in details and new directions have been introduced (Cook, 2014; Stewart, Archer, Barber, Tuddenham, Jacobs, 1993; Teece, Pisano, Shuen, 1997; Thayer, 1988; Theobald, 1994; Thurman, 1991; Walton and Hackman, 1986; Yukl, 1994; Zaccaro, 1996; Zald and Berger, 1996; Zsombok, Caroline, Klein, Kyne, Klinger, 1992).

### 3 Conclusions

In summary, startups are different from big corporates in many factors such as team size, uncertainty, employee financial security, employee satisfaction level, communication openness between employees and managers. The workforce undergoing these conditions requires a different human resources management model. According to the literature, previous studies have been more focused on HRM models on big companies and less focused on startups despite the criticality of human resources in startups. It was shown that more than 60% of the startup's failures are due to human-related factors. The startup HRM models reviewed in this paper discuss the issue from different perspectives.

The first approach is concerned with the level of formality with which a manager is dealing with employees. Despite the effectiveness of informality in making stronger bonds within team members, informality has a negative impact on the growth of startups due to resistance in transitioning to formality. Another approach focuses on the importance of open communication with managers and rewarding systems as satisfaction and motivation sources for employees. Despite the use of high commitment work systems (HCWS) for big organizations, a study has shown the impact of HCWS increasing the chances of startup IPO and decreasing the chances of failure. This is achieved by focusing mainly on increasing the employee's involvement through training, promotions, and sharing of profits. High-performance work systems are believed to boost autonomy with team members. This autonomy is achieved through self-managed teams, decentralized decision making, flexible work, and open communication system. As big corporates are routinized, a different HRM model should be followed to stimulate corporate entrepreneurship. According to this corporate entrepreneurship HRM model, HR architecture and the organizational environment are the two factors that should be optimized to empower the entrepreneurial orientation within the corporate. Finally, despite the increasing interest in studying startup HRM, a

more rigorous and comprehensive startups HRM model is still missing.

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