Human Resource Management in a Public-Sector Context

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Abstract and Keywords

Human resource management (HRM) scholars studying HRM in a public-sector context hold that the public-sector context is distinctive despite decades of reforms oriented on private-sector management principles. Distinctive characteristics include (1) the multiple goals that public organizations serve, making vertical alignment of HRM difficult; (2) the constraints on managerial autonomy resulting from red tape and trade union involvement; and (3) employees' public service motivation, which is antithetical to performance management. However, there is a lack of evidence on public- versus private-sector differences in the human resource practices that are actually applied. Using Cranet 2014/15 survey, this chapter examines whether public-sector institutional characteristics affect the application of human resource practices as theoretically expected. The results show that, compared to the late 1990s, HRM in public organizations continues to differ in some respects from HRM in private-sector organizations, but not in other respects. The traditional belief that public-sector HRM is not outright aimed at efficiency and effectiveness still holds. The public service ethic and the resilience of collectivized industrial relations likely contribute to this. However, the traditional public-sector HRM orientation on employee well-being is less distinctive, which will likely affect the position of public organizations in the labor market.

Keywords: public sector context, public/private sector comparisons, managerial autonomy, performance management, employee well-being

THERE is a modest but growing recognition of the impact of context on the design and implementation of human resource management (HRM) among HRM researchers (Paauwe & Boselie, 2007; Pudelko, 2006; Sparrow, 2009), particularly among scholars studying HRM in a public-sector context (Burke, Noblet, & Cooper 2013; Knies, Boselie, Gould-Williams, & Vandenabeele, 2018; Vandenabeele, Leisink, & Knies, 2013). These scholars are sensitive to context for a variety of reasons. First, as international HRM scholars, they face the very question of how the concept of *public sector* is understood and the vast differences in services that are provided as public services in various national contexts (Brewster, Boselie, Leisink, & Alfes, 2016). Because of these differences, the following section will explain how the concept of public sector is used here. Second, public-sector HRM scholars have indicated the distinctiveness of the public-sector context because of public values and civil service rules that are characteristic of how public organizations operate and manage their staff. This contextual distinctiveness is not recognized by the dominant generic approach to HRM, which takes business organizations as its frame of reference (Boselie, Dietz, & Boon, 2005). However, a range of countries in Europe, North America, and Australasia has undergone more than three decades of New Public Management (NPM) reforms with the aim of tackling what were regarded as the inefficiencies of the traditional bureaucratic model that required managers to adhere to civil service rules and prevented the orientation toward results that is typical of private-sector organizations (Goldfinch & Wallis, 2009; H. Rainey & Chun, 2005). These ongoing reforms have stimulated (p. 416) scholarly interest in the impact the reforms have had on the extent to which typical features of the traditional bureaucratic model endure (Hammerschmid, Van de Walle, Andrews, & Bezes, 2016; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Public personnel policies in the era of the expansion of the welfare state were primarily oriented toward fairness, employee well-being, and good relations with trade unions, rather than being driven by a rational management interest in improving organizational performance (Farnham & Horton, 1996). The emergence of HRM in the public sector was itself seen as a result of NPM (Boyne, Jenkins, & Poole, 1999). Initially, there were no indications of a shift in public personnel policies in the countries where NPM had an influence (Boyne et al., 1999). However, NPM reforms could have had a lagged impact. In addition, there are countries where NPM has had less or no influence. Therefore, it is relevant to analyze the context of public-sector organizations and the characteristics that theoretically may be assumed as distinctive and having an impact on the design and implementation of HRM in the public sector. This will help to interpret information regarding the question: To what extent is HRM in public organizations by 2020 different from that in private-sector organizations?

The following section will describe how we understand and apply a contextual approach in a public-sector context. The remaining sections will focus on three characteristics of the public-sector context that are regarded as distinctive by public management studies, namely, the intended performance outcomes and the HRM practices to achieve them, managerial autonomy, and employees' public service motivation and red tape perceptions.

Contextual Approach and Public-Sector Organizations

Human resource management in the public sector is a highly relevant issue to study, because public organizations are large, labor-intensive organizations. The quality of public services largely depends on the services delivered by public employees. Public organizations are under substantial pressure, originating from cutbacks caused by the Great Recession of 2008 onward, as well as from general public calls to increase accountability and improve the quality of services. To understand this complex context, this section describes what distinguishes the public sector historically from other contexts.

The large majority of HRM studies are conducted in private-sector organizations and have provided many valuable insights. However, an important question is to what extent these insights are generalizable to the public sector. Knies et al. (2018) recently argued that the public sector is not "just another context" when it comes to studying questions of HRM. They state that "there are often far-reaching implications for the study of HRM within the public sector, so applying 'what works' in private sector contexts to the public (p. 417) sector is too simplistic" (p. 2). The public sector has some distinctive characteristics that make it different from the private sector.

First, where private organizations often have a single bottom line (maximizing profit), public organizations have a mission that outlines "the value that the organization intends to produce for its stakeholders and society at large" (Moore, 2000, pp. 189–190). The mission often consists of multiple goals that can conflict (H. G. Rainey, 2009). This characteristic makes it arguably more difficult to align HRM policies with the organization's strategic goals and to achieve horizontal integration between different sets of HRM practices.

Second, empirical research shows that public organizations apply some sets of HRM practices more than others and differ in this respect from the pattern found in private organizations. These sets are seen as fitting the characteristics of public-sector employees and echo public organizations' tradition of being a model employer (Kalleberg, Marsden, Reynolds, & Knoke, 2006). Also, in the public sector not all HRM practices are implemented with the strategy in mind. Some practices are the result of a high degree of institutionalization.

Third, the link between HRM and performance deserves specific attention, because the organizational context and the attributes of public-sector employees are regarded as distinctive and impacting the HRM–performance relationship. Particular features that are often highlighted (see Knies & Leisink, 2018; H. G. Rainey, 2009) are the limited managerial autonomy of public managers, "red tape," and employees' public service motivation (see later sections of this chapter).

Knies et al. (2018) argue that scholars should reflect on the implications of these distinctive characteristics for research. This could imply that HRM scholars use theories or concepts that are developed in the field of public administration and public management or that they include sector-specific variables in their models. This will increase the relevance of their research but might decrease the generalizability of their findings and the rigor of their work at the same time. Therefore, contextualizing in research is a balancing act (Dewettinck & Remue, 2011).

Public organizations provide services ordered and/or mainly financed by government to citizens and corporate actors. Organizations are defined as public on the basis of the following three formal characteristics: ownership, funding, and authority (Rainey, 2009). Public organizations are government owned, they are mainly publicly funded, and the political authority is dominant over the economic authority, meaning that public managers' authority is dependent on and subjected to political decision-making. These formal characteristics allow for considerable variety. On the one hand, there are the national police and army, which are fully public on all three criteria. On the other hand, in many countries, government-funded and mandated services are increasingly provided by organizational networks involving public, not-for-profit, and private organizations. An example of such a not-for-profit organization providing public services is the Salvation Army, which operates in many countries to provide relief and social care to people in need. An example of institutional variation is provided by healthcare providers: In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service represents all three formal (p. 418) criteria, while in the Netherlands healthcare is provided by organizations that are legally private bodies with a public task. In this chapter, data collected by Cranet are used to complement our conceptual analyses. For these empirical analyses, data were used from only those sectors that, based on the three formal characteristics, can unambiguously be defined as either public (public administration, compulsory social security, education, human health services) or private (e.g., agriculture, manufacturing of food, chemicals, electronic products, wholesale).

What is regarded as public employment depends on the characteristics chosen. Thijs, Hammerschmid, and Palaric (2018, pp. 7–8) illustrate this for public employment in the twenty-eight EU member states. The level of public-sector employment varies between 29.7 percent of total employment, including employment in education and healthcare, and 6.9 percent when limited to government/public administration and excluding education and healthcare. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2017) uses the concept of general government employment, which covers employment in all levels of government (central, state, local, and social security funds). The latest edition of "Government at a Glance" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017) concludes that the size of general government employment varies significantly among OECD countries. Nordic countries report the highest government employment levels, reaching near 30 percent of total employment. OECD countries from the Asian region have low levels of public-sector employment (under 8 percent). In between, Anglo-American countries can be found, with levels varying between 15 and 20 percent.

This chapter's bias toward advanced economies is recognized. This is related to the lack of research on HRM in the public sector in developing countries. Acknowledging that there are large differences between developing countries, Rees (2013) notes that the political, social, economic, educational, health, and environmental problems in developing countries inevitably result in inadequate delivery of public services, specifically because public-sector organizations lack the human capacity to deliver them. Rees (2013) relates this to the state of HRM, involving low salary levels, lack of effective performance standards, inability to fire people and to hire appropriately trained people, and inadequate management by supervisors.

Public Service Performance, Employee Outcomes, and Public-Sector Human Resource Management Practices

Paralleling the ongoing process of public management reforms, public management research has made the study of performance a central issue. Performance can generally be understood as an organization's actual achievement of its intended goals. Given the multiple goals of public organizations and the different stakeholders involved, the (p. 419) conceptualization of performance continues to be a difficult issue (Andersen, Boersen, & Pedersen, 2016). Because employee outcomes do not get much attention in public service performance measures, these will be discussed specifically because public employees are an important stakeholder from the perspective of public-sector HRM. In addition, the HRM practices that are used to achieve public service performance and employee outcomes will be examined.

Public Service Performance and Employee Outcomes: The Concepts

Public organizations have different stakeholders who hold diverse views on what constitutes good performance. For instance, efficiency will be important from the taxpayers' point of view, but quality of service will be important for the client and equity for politicians. Tackling this diversity of interests and opinions, Brewer and Selden (2000) proposed a multidimensional concept of performance involving efficiency, effectiveness, and fairness. Boyne (2002) studied performance in local government and proposed another multidimensional conceptualization consisting of five dimensions: outputs, efficiency, outcomes, responsiveness, and democratic outcomes. Many studies have followed these conceptualizations and adapted them to the study of performance in different public organizations such as schools, hospitals, and municipalities (Andrews & Boyne, 2010; Boyne, Meier, O'Toole, & Walker, 2006; Van Loon, 2016). Outcomes may, for instance, be measured by the percentage of students leaving school with a diploma or the percentage of burglaries solved by the police. Clients' satisfaction is an indicator of responsiveness, as are measures of satisfaction by citizens and staff. Examining the diversity of performance criteria used in research, Andersen et al. (2016) suggests that it may be impossible to come up with a comprehensive measurement. They argue that researchers should account for why they include certain dimensions and what other aspects of performance they exclude.

Human resource management scholars began to acknowledge the importance of paying attention to employee outcomes in the late 1990s (Peccei, Van de Voorde, & Van Veldhoven, 2013). By "bringing in the employee," many theories from organizational behavior and organizational psychology were integrated into HRM research. This resulted in a considerable body of research under the overarching heading “employee well-being.” Employee well-being at work is often broadly described as the overall quality of an employee’s experience and functioning at work (Warr, 1987). While the classic conceptualization only focused on the amount of affect employees experienced (pleasures minus displeasures) because of their work, more multidimensional conceptualizations are proposed in the early twenty-first century (Taris & Schaufeli, 2015; Van Horn, Taris, Schaufeli, & Scheurs, 2004).

One of the most applied multidimensional conceptualizations in HRM research is the distinction between health, happiness, and relationships well-being (Van de Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). The health component refers to physiological and psychological indicators like organizational stress and need for recovery. The second component, happiness, refers to subjective experiences of employees (i.e., psychological well-being), such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The relationships component of employee well-being, social well-being, focuses on the quality of relations between employees and their employer and colleagues, for example, trust, social support, and cooperation. The happiness dimension has recently received an upgrade by a new dimensional approach, which makes a distinction between eudaemonic and hedonic employee well-being (Borst, Kruyen, & Lako, 2019). While both forms are focused on happiness/pleasure, hedonic well-being is aimed at enjoyment and contentment, as in the classical conceptualization, and eudaemonic well-being refers to purposefulness and meaningfulness (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009). Examples of this eudaemonic employee well-being are the rather new concepts of vitality, work engagement, and pride (Tummers, Steijn, Nevicka, & Heerema, 2016).

Outcomes and Human Resource Management Practices in a Public-Sector Context

Human resource management refers to the management of work and people with the aim of achieving organizational, employee, and societal outcomes (Boxall & Purcell, 2011). Alignment of HRM and organizational strategy could involve different HRM policies with a view to different strategic outcomes (Boxall & Purcell, 2011, pp. 333–335). Concretely, the HRM policy to achieve efficiency might be different from the policy to achieve employee well-being. Following Boxall and Purcell (2011, pp. 24–32), tensions in HRM related to different goals may be assumed.

Compared with this broader notion of strategic alignment, Boyne et al. (1999, pp. 408–411) reserve the notion of rational management for a “hard” model of HRM oriented on greater efficiency, effective job performance, and quality of service. They observe that “the traditional pattern of HRM in the public sector is, by assumption, a barrier to better organizational performance” (p. 411). This traditional pattern of HRM consisted of the “soft” model of HRM oriented on employee well-being, in which public organizations aspired to the status of model employer. In their study of HRM practices in the public and private sectors, Boyne et al. (1999) found that public-sector organizations make less use of reward practices such as performance-related pay and of policies promoting numerical flexibility, both of which they associate with a business-like approach to performance, as in private organizations. By contrast, Boyne et al. (1999) found that HRM practices such as training and development, employee participation, equal opportunities, and employee welfare policies prevailed in public organizations.

A study by Kalleberg et al. (2006) of the use of high-performance work system practices in profit, nonprofit, and public organizations found related differences in the (p. 421) sets of HRM practices used. Arguing that public organizations are likely more interested in high-performance work system practices that fit their mission, they found that public organizations made less use of gain-sharing and profit-sharing plans to motivate employees and more use of teamwork and employee participation in decision-making, which are more compatible with the humanistic goals that public organizations hold. These latter HRM practices, together with employee involvement schemes, communication programs, training, and personal development programs, are believed to promote employee commitment, participation, trust, and collaboration and, inherently, employee well-being. These are also labeled as high-commitment HRM practices associated with the soft HRM model, as opposed to the high-performance HRM practices associated with the “hard” HRM model, which is oriented on control (Gould-Williams, 2007; Tremblay, Cloutier, Simard, Chênevert, & Vandenberghe, 2010). However, there is little consensus on the classification of HRM practices.

The studies by Boyne et al. (1999) and Kalleberg et al. (2006) report results on public-sector HRM dating back ten to twenty years. In the meantime, public management reforms have influenced public-sector values, in many cases putting efficiency and effectiveness on par with traditional public values of legality and impartiality (Leisink & Knies, 2018). The adoption by public organizations of what Boyne et al. (1999) call more rational management could mean that the contrast between public- and private-sector HRM is nowadays smaller. Yet, the institutional context of public organizations likely continues to exert influence on the public organizations’ understanding of their goals and their related use of HRM practices. Therefore, public organizations are expected to make less use of the HRM practices that are associated with the hard HRM performance model, notably reward and performance-related pay, appraisal for the purpose of pay decisions, and working arrangements that aim at increasing numerical flexibility. Likewise, HRM practices that explicitly focus on employee well-being and that are associated with the soft HRM model are expected to occur more in the public sector than in the private sector. These include training and development programs, career management plans, and team working and employee participation practices. In addition, practices that symbolize the model employer ambition are likely more prevalent in the public than in the private sector, notably equal opportunity and employee welfare schemes.

In Table 19.1, the results of the logistic regressions based on the Cranet 2014/15 data are presented for all the relationships between the HRM practices and the public/private sector divide.[1] Table 19.1 shows, in the columns, respectively, the percentage of public organizations applying the practices, the percentage of private organizations applying the practices, the regression effect and its standard error, the odds ratio of the regression effect, and the significance of the regression effect. While the significance indicates (p. 422) (p. 423) whether the public/private sector divide significantly affects the application of a practice by organizations, the regression coefficient and odds ratio (Exp. B) indicate the size and direction in which the relation is heading. If the regression weight is negative and the odds ratio is lower than 1.0, the practice is applied more by public-sector organizations than private organizations and vice versa. In every logistic analysis, the public/private divide is the independent variable, the HRM practices is the dependent variable, and the organizational size and service/industry divide the control variables.

Table 19.1. Human resource management practices aimed at appraisal and performance, compensation and benefit schemes, diversity management, and development and career management

Item	Public (*n* = 1.169–1.253) (%)	Private (*n* = 2.483–2.593) (%)	B*	SE	Exp(B)*	Sig.
Appraisal system for:						
Management	66.2	78.3	0.945	0.111	2.573	0.000
Professionals without managerial responsibility	64.5	77.9	0.880	0.108	2.412	0.000
Clericals and/or manuals	61.0	73.1	0.794	0.102	2.212	0.000
Appraisal data used for:						
Salary	53.5	74.5	1.012	0.103	2.752	0.000
Training and development	64.0	79.6	0.967	0.112	2.630	0.000

Career moves	56.0	78.6	1.250	0.110	3.490	0.000
Workforce planning	40.8	57.4	0.692	0.094	1.998	0.000
Compensation and benefits schemes						
Employee share schemes	4.9	23.3	1.711	0.154	5.535	0.000
Profit sharing	7.3	37.1	1.786	0.131	5.967	0.000
Stock options	2.9	21.0	1.884	0.190	6.577	0.000
Flexible benefits	23.1	40.8	0.843	0.097	2.323	0.000
Individual performance-related pay	40.1	66.2	1.109	0.093	3.030	0.000

Bonus based on individual goals/perfor-mance	29.5	71.4	1.963	0.100	7.123	0.000
Bonus based on team goals/perfor-mance	18.1	53.5	1.718	0.100	5.573	0.000
Bonus based on organiza-tional goals/ performance	21.9	62.4	1.823	0.099	6.191	0.000
Nonmone-tary incen-tives	38.2	54.9	0.970	0.091	2.637	0.000
Diversity management						
Action** programs for minorities	26.9	18.3	–0.707	0.114	0.493	0.000

Action** programs for older workers (>50 years)	25.9	25.1	–0.053	0.102	0.949	0.604
Action** programs for people with disabilities	35.8	29.9	–0.235	0.095	0.790	0.013
Action** programs for women	28.8	35.7	0.244	0.096	1.276	0.011
Action** programs for women returners	22.2	28.0	0.398	0.101	1.490	0.000
Action** programs for low-skilled labor	24.1	30.6	0.003	0.104	1.003	0.981

Action** programs for younger workers (<25 years)	33.0	47.1	0.484	0.092	1.623	0.000
Development and career management ***						
Special tasks	22.3	29.3	0.447	0.103	1.564	0.000
Projects to stimulate learning	24.2	29.3	0.251	0.102	1.285	0.014
Training on the job	47.2	64.7	0.684	0.094	1.981	0.000
Participation in project teamwork	32.8	46.1	0.529	0.093	1.698	0.000
Formal net-working schemes	14.3	15.5	0.094	0.127	1.099	0.459

Formal career plans	11.7	20.3	0.621	0.125	1.862	0.000
Development centers	8.9	14.3	0.395	0.148	1.484	0.008
Succession plans	10.8	28.9	1.074	0.123	2.926	0.000
Planned job rotation	6.8	15.9	0.722	0.153	2.058	0.000
"High flier" schemes/ high potentials	9.7	28.3	1.147	0.127	3.149	0.000
International work assignments to gain experience	7.2	16.4	0.537	0.157	1.710	0.001
Coaching	20.0	31.3	0.809	0.103	2.247	0.000
Mentoring	20.1	27.8	0.444	0.106	1.559	0.000

Computer-based packages/e-learning	17.7	25.4	0.894	0.106	2.444	0.000

(*) 0 = public, 1 = private.

(**) Recruitment, training, and/or career progression programs.

(***) 0 = barely applied; 1 = frequently applied.

Source: Cranet (2014/15) as accounted for by CRANET (2017). *CRANET survey on comparative human resource management: International executive report 2017*. Cranfield University: Cranfield Network.

Table 19.1 shows successively the appraisal practices, the compensation and benefit practices, the diversity management practices, and the development and career management practices. In line with expectations, private organizations apply appraisal systems for every job type more frequently in their organizations than public organizations. These private organizations also use the data extracted from these appraisal systems (p. 424) more often to determine workforce planning, the salary of employees, which employees deserve to be promoted, and which employees deserve and/or need training. Private organizations also give bonuses based on (individual, team, and/or organizational) performance appraisal significantly more often than public organizations. In fact, not merely bonuses but also all compensation and benefits schemes are applied more often by private organizations than by public organizations, including pay for performance, flexible benefits, and even nonmonetary incentives. All these results are in line with the expectation that private organizations more often apply hard HRM practices than public organizations.

However, contrary to expectations, soft HRM practices such as development and career management practices, including, for example, participation in learning and team projects, career and succession planning, and support via coaching and mentoring, are significantly more often applied in private than in public organizations. Also, diversity programs for younger workers, women, and women returners were applied more frequently in private than in public organizations. Still, public organizations more often apply diversity programs for people with disabilities and minorities. Therefore, the results do not in all cases contradict the expectation that public organizations apply soft HRM practices more than private organizations. Nevertheless, because of the contrasting results in the case of development and career management practices and the mixed results in the case of diversity management practices, the findings about soft HRM practices can be called inconclusive at best.

This inconclusiveness is further confirmed by the results of work arrangements, including, for example, teleworking, part-time working, and overtime working, and practices related to benefits in excess of statutory requirements, including, for example, workplace child care, maternity and paternity leave, and pension schemes. The differences between the public and private sectors in the application of these practices are nonsignificant (and therefore are not shown in Table 19.1), with the exception of the work arrangements: weekend work, shift work, part-time work, temporary work, and fixed-term contracts. These practices were applied more often by public organizations than by private organizations.[2] This difference may partly be explained by the public sector of health services, which are typically a twenty-four-hour per day/seven-day per week activity. Additional analyses showed that health services are much more likely to have the work arrangements of weekend work, shift work, and part-time work than public administration and compulsory social security organizations.

Overall, the results show that the traditional contrast between public- and private-sector HRM is smaller by 2020. While public organizations still apply hard HRM (p. 425) practices that fit rational performance management less often than private organizations, they also apply several soft HRM practices aimed at employee well-being less often than private organizations, or at best in equal amounts. While public organizations did not shift to more rational HRM management, they either diminished their investment in soft HRM management or private organizations started to invest more in soft HRM management.

Managerial Autonomy

Several authors (Boyne et al., 1999; H. G. Rainey, 2009) argue that the public sector is characterized by constraints on managerial autonomy. This is arguably the result of the strength of government directives, detailed personnel policy regulations, and the heritage of traditional administrative HRM roles. Organizations with low degrees of managerial autonomy are often characterized by centralization in decision-making. Meyer and Hammerschmid (2010) studied the degree of decentralization of HRM decision-making in central government and showed that, on average, HRM decision-making in the twenty-seven EU member states is highly centralized. However, there is considerable variation between HRM practices. Some HRM practices are typically decided at the central level, such as salaries, codes of conduct and ethical standards, head count reduction, and basic working time arrangements. Other HRM practices are decided at lower hierarchical levels, such as performance-related pay, performance management, training and development, and flexible working time patterns. This resonates with findings by Brewster, Brookes, and Gollan (2015) that decision-making responsibilities for industrial relations and pay and benefits tend to be assigned to central HRM departments. Meyer and Hammerschmid (2010) also show that there is considerable variation between countries. Human resource management decision-making ranges from most centralized in eastern European countries to least centralized in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian EU member states, with southern European and continental member states occupying a position in between. Again, these findings are largely in line with Brewster et al. (2015), who show that the Nordic countries are most decentralized and liberal market economies are most centralized, with coordinated market economies lying in between.

O’Toole and Meier (2014) argue that we should delve deeper into contextual characteristics that can explain management’s impact on performance. Their main argument is that the more complex the context is, the more constraints for managers are created, and as a result, the impact that management has on performance decreases. They developed two sets of hypotheses that specify which external and internal contextual factors impact the management–performance relationship. Examples of external context factors are politics and the concentration of power, complexity, turbulence, and munificence. Internal factors that O’Toole and Meier expect to impact (p. 426) the management–performance relationship are organizational goals (goal ambiguity and goal conflict), centralization, and professionalization.

Although O’Toole and Meier (2014) advocate an approach that goes beyond “simple” private–public differences, we compare the levels of managerial autonomy between the public and private sectors using the data collected by the Cranet Network. We do so by studying the level of devolution of HRM responsibilities to line managers (see also Brewster et al., 2015; Larsen & Brewster, 2003). The rationale underlying this analysis is that the more HRM responsibilities are devolved to line managers, the higher the level of decentralization, which implies more managerial autonomy. Theoretically, higher levels of devolution are to be expected in the private sector, compared to the public sector. However, as Meyer and Hammerschmid (2010) note, a higher degree of decentralization does not necessarily imply a higher degree of managerial autonomy, because in the public sector other stakeholders such as works councils and trade unions might be involved in decision-making. Therefore, we also study private–public differences regarding the involvement of trade unions and works councils (see Table 19.2 for the logistic regression).

Table 19.2. Managerial autonomy in personnel management of public versus private organizations

Item	Public (n = 1.170–1.253) (%)	Private (n = 2.296–2.593) (%)	*B**	SE	Exp(B)*	Sig.
Responsibility for major personnel policy decisions**						
Pay and benefits	48.4	53.4	0.281	0.090	1.324	0.002
Recruitment and selection	37.9	55.8	0.707	0.091	2.027	0.000
Training and development	42.4	61.0	0.883	0.093	2.418	0.000
Industrial relations	57.1	69.4	0.753	0.099	2.123	0.000
Workforce expansion/reduction	34.3	41.4	0.422	0.092	1.525	0.000
Third-party involvement						
Trade unions	82.7	68.1	–1.144	0.108	0.318	0.000

Work councils	60.8	53.7	–0.566	0.092	0.568	0.000

(*) 0 = public; 1 = private.

(**) 0 = predominantly line management; 1 = predominantly human resource management department.

Source: Cranet (2014/15) as accounted for by CRANET (2017). *CRANET survey on comparative human resource management: International executive report 2017*. Cranfield University: Cranfield Network.

The analysis of the Cranet data regarding the actor who has primary responsibility for personnel policy decisions in a number of areas shows, contrary to expectation, (p. 427) that being a public-sector organization increases the chances of the primary responsibility residing with line management (alone or in consultation with the HRM department) and that being a private-sector organization increases the chances of the primary responsibility residing with the HRM department (alone or in consultation with line management). This holds not just for personnel policy areas that, according to Meyer and Hammerschmid (2010), are decided at lower hierarchical levels, such as training and development, but also for policy areas such as industrial relations that are typically decided at the central level. However, the observation that the devolution of HRM responsibilities to the line does not necessarily imply a higher degree of managerial autonomy draws support from the data as well. As expected, being a public-sector organization increases the chances compared with private-sector organizations of recognizing trade unions for the purpose of collective bargaining and having a joint consultative committee or works council. This means that while authority in major personnel policy decisions rests with line management in public organizations, their autonomy is constrained by institutional arrangements that provide trade unions and works councils with the rights of negotiation, approval, and/or advice. This may be an important factor in explaining why, for instance, the chances of public organizations applying performance-related compensation and benefit schemes are relatively low.

Employees' Public Service Motivation and Red Tape Perceptions

Theoretical models of how HRM contributes to performance and employee outcomes include the notion that HRM as perceived by employees impacts their attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately unit-level and organizational performance (Wright & Nishii, 2013). Employees' attitudes and behaviors are influenced by HRM in various ways (Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012). Supportive HRM practices will make employees feel valued, cared about, and obliged to reciprocate by engaging in behavior that contributes to organizational goals. Employees will also feel supported by HRM practices that enhance their abilities to do a good job. However, Boxall and Purcell (2011) point out that even the most able and motivated employees cannot do a good job if they lack the opportunities (e.g., autonomy, information, time) to do so. Applying this logic to the public sector, studies point out that employees' public service motivation (PSM), the motivation to contribute to society, is an important resource for achieving performance and is also positively related to employees' well-being (Vandenabeele et al., 2013). In addition to PSM, "red tape" is regarded as another typical public-sector characteristic, but one that, in contrast to PSM, is detrimental to organizational performance and employee outcomes. Red tape refers to (p. 428) rules and procedures that entail a compliance burden but lack efficacy for the rules' functional object (Bozeman & Feeney, 2011). The negative effect of red tape is based on the idea that these burdensome rules require employees to spend time and energy on excessive paperwork that serves no purpose and leads to frustration. The following sections will elaborate on the role that PSM and red tape play with regard to the HRM–performance and HRM–employee outcomes relationships. Because of a lack of Cranet data on PSM and red tape, the following sections will be based on public management studies.

Public Service Motivation, Red Tape, and Performance

Public service–motivated people can fulfill their motive to do good for society by seeking employment in public-sector organizations. Public service–motivated employees are willing to exert themselves at work because they identify with the organization's mission and the purpose of their work. Empirical studies have provided support for the proposition that PSM is positively related to individual job performance (Bellé, 2013; Leisink & Steijn, 2009; Vandenabeele, 2009) and organizational performance (Kim, 2005; Ritz, 2009). Van Loon (2016) emphasized the need to distinguish between performance dimensions, because she found positive relationships between PSM and the public service performance dimensions of service output and outcome, but not for the dimensions of efficiency and responsiveness.

Human resource management can affect public employees' PSM and thereby their contribution to performance in a variety of ways. It can have a positive effect, for instance, by recruiting and selecting public service–motivated employees (Leisink & Steijn, 2008), by training programs and socializing employees in the public values that are related to the organization's mission (Kjeldsen, 2013), and by designing jobs that fit with employees' PSM (Van Loon, Vandenabeele, & Leisink 2017). However, HRM can also have negative effects on employees' PSM and thereby on their job performance, for instance, by crowding out their PSM by pay-for-performance schemes (Weibel, Rost, & Osterloh, 2010), by control-oriented managerial actions (Jacobsen, Hvitved, & Andersen, 2014), or by adding to the red tape with which employees are confronted in their job (Feeney & Rainey, 2009).

Studies provide support for the claim that red tape affects organizational performance negatively (Blom, Kruyen, Van der Heijden, & Van Thiel, 2020; Jacobsen & Jakobsen, 2018), notably service quality, but has no significant effect on efficiency (Brewer & Walker, 2010). When studying red tape as perceived by managers, the argument is that red tape constrains managers' HRM activities because managers are limited in rewarding good performers and firing poor performers (Pandey, Coursey, & Moynihan, 2007). When studying red tape as perceived by employees, the argument is that red tape prevents street-level bureaucrats or public professionals from using their discretion and professional expertise that are needed for executing their tasks in (p. 429) direct interaction with their clients, and as a consequence, employees become demotivated and public service organizations are likely to perform poorly (Jacobsen & Jakobsen, 2018).

Public Service Motivation, Red Tape, and Employee Outcomes

Public service motivation is also positively related to employee outcomes, including attitudes (e.g., satisfaction, commitment, and work engagement) and behavior (e.g., work effort and responsiveness). A meta-analysis by Homberg, McCarthy, and Tabvuma (2015) shows, for example, that PSM positively affects employees' job satisfaction. Another meta-analysis, by Harari, Herst, Parola, and Carmona (2017), confirms these findings and additionally shows that PSM positively affects employee attitudes, organizational commitment, and the behavioral attitude organizational citizenship behavior.

However, there are also studies that show that PSM can have a negative impact on employee outcomes. It has been found to be positively related to stress (Giauque, Ritz, Varone, & Anderfuhren-Biget, 2012), job dissatisfaction, and burnout (Van Loon, Vandenabeele, & Leisink, 2015) and negatively related to physical well-being (Liu, Yang, & Yu, 2015). The explanation for these negative effects is the apparent misfit between the person with PSM and the environment. In other words, if employees cannot fulfill their desire to serve the public interest (PSM) because of environmental/organizational burdens and constraints or if they experience the values of the employing organization as dissimilar to their own personal values, these employees will probably develop negative attitudes and behaviors (Schott & Ritz, 2018).

To thrive on the positive employee outcomes of PSM and to overcome the negative outcomes resulting from misfits, HRM can play an important role. We previously noted some HRM practices that can increase PSM and, inherently, in many cases, employee outcomes. Other practices could be applied to diminish the risk of misfits. Quratulain and Kahn (2015) show that public service–motivated employees develop negative attitudes and behaviors because they feel incongruent with the values of their organization as a result of red tape. Several soft HRM practices might prevent such a misfit and improve employee outcomes, including job enrichment, participation in decision-making, individual appraisal, and professional development (Homberg & Vogel, 2016).

Red tape may also negatively affect other employee outcomes. When public servants encounter rules, regulations, or procedures that seem pointless, yet burdensome, they become alienated from their work, less creative, and less satisfied, committed, and engaged (Borst et al., 2019; DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005). However, red tape does not necessarily always have such a negative effect on employee outcomes. In situations where red tape coincides with available HRM practices, these practices might be used by public employees to cope with the red tape (Borst et al., 2019). These HRM practices then might gain their motivational potential, leading to increased employee outcomes.

(p. 430)

Conclusion

Comparative empirical studies of HRM in public and private organizations are scarce. That is why the Cranet survey provides valuable data but also why caution is required in drawing conclusions unless we examine longitudinal data that provide the basis for describing the development of HRM in a public-sector context over time. Nevertheless, based on the findings that were reported, the question can be answered as to what extent HRM in public organizations by 2020 is different from HRM in private-sector organizations. It appears that public-sector organizations are less likely than private-sector organizations to engage in HRM policies of pay for performance, of appraisal for the purpose of taking HRM decisions (e.g., about pay), and of various development and career management schemes. Public-sector organizations are not likely to differ from private-sector organizations as regard HRM practices related to increasing flexibility and to employee welfare benefits in excess of statutory requirements. Finally, mixed results are evident when diversity action programs are examined: Public-sector organizations are more likely to support programs that target minorities and people with disabilities, while private-sector organizations are more likely to support programs that target women and young workers.

Overall, these results indicate that HRM in public organizations continues to differ in some respects, but not in others, from HRM in private-sector organizations compared to the turn of the twenty-first century. There is still little or no evidence in public organizations of what Boyne et al. (1999) called rational management aimed at efficiency, effective job performance, and quality of service through performance-related pay. The evidence of working arrangements supporting flexibility seems to indicate that public organizations have taken on board this element that Boyne et al. (1999) include in rational management. So, on the one hand, we find few HRM practices associated with the hard HRM model. On the other hand, we also find that public organizations are not more likely than private organizations to engage in HRM practices associated with the soft HRM model. This is illustrated by the scores on, for instance, the HRM practices in training and development, team working, and career management schemes and the HRM practices for employee welfare in excess of statutory requirements through which public organizations used to signal their model employer role. With regard to most of these HRM practices, private-sector organizations are as likely as public organizations to apply them.

What do these findings imply for assumptions about the distinctiveness of public organizations and how can they be explained?[3] The relative absence of (p. 431) performance-related pay schemes in public organizations stands out as an enduring feature. This is related to the absence of profit as the single bottom line, as in private organizations. This also makes sense in relation to a workforce characterized by PSM, which is positively related to employee performance and employee well-being, but which would be crowded out by performance-related pay. However, the distinctive image of public organizations as being model employers and oriented around employee well-being seems no longer warranted. This could be explained by austerity measures with which public organizations have been confronted during the economic crisis that erupted in 2008 (Bach & Bordogna, 2016). However, this could also be related to mimetic mechanisms inducing private organizations to imitate specific HRM practices of their public competitors in the labor market (Paauwe & Boselie, 2007). The latter explanation is supported by the lack of significant differences between public and private organizations' HRM regarding benefits in excess of statutory requirements and even more by private organizations' greater likelihood in offering all kinds of development and career management schemes. These latter schemes may differ from the traditional public organizations' paternalistic understanding of employee well-being in that they may reflect an orientation on the development and use of human capital for organizational and employee outcomes that is absent in public-sector organizations.

There is one other enduring characteristic of public organizations that needs to be taken into account, namely, the resilience of collectivized industrial relations with extensive scope for staff participation and good relations with trade unions (Farnham & Horton, 1996). This institutional feature, which characterizes public organizations more strongly than private organizations, goes along with distinctive values, for instance, regarding equal treatment, illustrated by equal pay for equal jobs rather than performance-related pay, and collective rights to training and development rather than selective career schemes for high potentials. In addition, the prevalence of trade unions and works councils in public organizations implies that public managers' autonomy is constrained. Although decision-making in major HRM areas has been devolved to line management in public organizations and although public organizations stand out from private organizations by the primary responsibility for major HRM policy decisions being assigned to line management, managerial autonomy in public organizations is limited because of enduring institutional arrangements that provide employee representatives the rights of collective bargaining, approval, and advice. This feature may explain partly why pay schemes as important instruments of rational management still differ between public and private organizations, protecting employees according to collective values, but also why public (p. 432) organizations have not been able to innovate their model employer role, leaving public organizations in a difficult position to compete with private organizations in a tight labor market.

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Notes:

([1]) Logistic regression is chosen as the statistical technique since most variables are binary. A few exceptions are work arrangements and benefits in excess of statutory requirements that were ordinal. For reasons of uniformity and readability, we chose to recode the relatively few variables that were ordinal into binary variables.

([2]) These results must be interpreted with caution since these practices were not measured via apply/not apply, but via the extent to which the practices were used by employees in percentages. The demarcation between frequently applied and not/barely applied is therefore rather arbitrary. Another statistical technique such as analysis of covariance would have been more suitable. However, as mentioned in Note 1, most of the data were binary, causing us to choose for readability and uniformity and to sacrifice some, but still very little, information.

([3]) The conclusions are based on an overall analysis of the Cranet data. These data include a wide variety of countries with various institutional characteristics. The results are therefore fairly representative for the overall relationships between HRM tasks/instruments and public- vis-à-vis private-sector divisions across countries. Although specific moderating effects could be present, our overall analysis gives no further reason to expect strong effects of contextual factors such as developing vis-à-vis developed countries and more substantive public administration–specific country differences (e.g., NPM vis-à-vis not NPM or Germanic vis-à-vis Anglo-Saxon administrative systems).

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