The acceptance of newly introduced HR practices

Some evidence from Spain on the role of management behavior and organizational climate

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Abstract

Purpose – HR practices are only effective if they are well accepted by employees. The purpose of this paper is to explore the effect of two forms of support on the acceptance of newly introduced HR practices (NHRPs): that of top managers and of supervisors. In addition, the authors analyze how these two forms of support work in conjunction with one another. The authors argue that a lack of consistency between the two impairs NHRP acceptance. The authors also explore variations in acceptance under different organizational climates.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis is based on an original sample of 307 employees from nine multinational companies operating in Spain. Multilevel regression analysis is used to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The authors found that top management support, supervisor support, and innovation climate are all predictors of NHRP acceptance. The authors also found that low supervisor support reduces the effect of top management support. Finally, the authors found that innovation climate is not a substitute for management and supervisor support.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that top management and supervisor behavior is critical to gaining employee acceptance of NHRPs, no matter how well designed such practices are or how well they address the needs of the organization and its employees. The findings also indicate that top managers and supervisors should coordinate the introduction of NHRPs, since employees perceive support signals from these two agents not only individually but also in conjunction.

Originality/value – Recognizing that employee acceptance is an important determinant of the effectiveness of HR practices, the authors make a unique contribution to the literature by investigating some critical contextual enablers of acceptance.

Keywords Acceptance, HR practices, Top management support, Innovation climate, Supervisor support

Introduction

Numerous studies show that HR practices enhance organizational performance by positively influencing employee attitudes and behaviors. However, research has begun

to acknowledge that employee reaction to HR practices is an important antecedent of the effectiveness of such practices, for they cannot deliver the desired organizational outcomes without employee positive response (Nishii *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, although there is no strong evidence showing the extent to which employees view HR practices favorably, some recent data suggest caution in that respect. For example, Cantrell and Smith (2010) found that barely one-third of the employees in a wide sample of American firms held a favorable opinion of HR practices in their respective workplaces.

Low acceptance of HR practices can be costly; in addition to development, implementation, and opportunity costs, it may also entail critical HR costs. Indeed, it may result in negative work attitudes and increased feelings of stress (Bacon and Blyton, 2005), thereby reducing employee output. Similarly, it may cause absenteeism and withdrawal behaviors (Fisher and Howell, 2004). Consequently, some scholars have suggested that, as a measure of effectiveness, employee acceptance of HR practices is as important as objective measures such as ROI or productivity (Gómez-Mejía and Balkin, 1987).

For these reasons, it is worthwhile to analyze the circumstances under which HR practices can best gain acceptance. In this study we explore the role of top management and supervisor behavior as an antecedent of acceptance. We also analyze the consequences of inconsistencies between top management and supervisor behavior. In addition, we examine whether readiness to accept HR practices is associated with organizational climate, and how climate interacts with top management and supervisor behavior to influence acceptance. We test our hypotheses using an original sample of 307 employees from nine multinational companies operating in Spain. Specifically, our focus is on the acceptance of 36 HR practices recently introduced in such companies; that is, practices that are perceived as new by employees. For this reason we refer to them as new HR practices. We believe that such an analysis may offer relevant insights to firms aiming to successfully implement changes and innovations in their HR management.

Theory and hypotheses
Firms have become considerably more interested in investing in HR practices in recent years. Investments in HR practices are supported by many studies showing a positive relationship between these practices and such organizational outcomes as increased efficiency, productivity, and profitability (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013). However, research has also begun to acknowledge that the mere use of HR practices may not be sufficient to enhance business success: they have to translate into productive employee behavior (Schuler and Jackson, 1987). For this to happen, employees must first respond positively to HR practices. Building on the recognition that HR practices and performance are very distal from one another, Wright and Nishii (2013) proposed a multi-level process model of SHRM that theoretically shows how employees' perceptions and interpretations of HR practices affect their work attitudes and behaviors, which in turn influence organizational outcomes. Purcell and Kinnie (2007) echoed such a model, arguing that employees' perceptions of HR practices is at the heart of any HR causal chain "because [employees] are the focal point of HR practices and they deliver performance" (p. 548). Consistent with this view, Nishii *et al.* (2008) found that positive employee perceptions of HR policies deliver desired behaviors, which in turn positively affect performance. In contrast, negative employee perceptions are inversely related to expected behaviors and performance. These findings suggest that even well-intended and strategically designed HR practices may

not succeed in eliciting the desired behaviors unless workers hold positive views about them. Based on previous research on employee responses to organizational innovations and organizational change (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2005), in the present study, we use the term acceptance to refer to the extent to which employees feel positive about an HR practice.

Acceptance is especially key when it comes to newly introduced HR practices (NHRPs) – HR practices with which employees are not familiar. NHRPs, like other kinds of workplace innovations, can sometimes disrupt existing procedures and work habits. Such disruptions may engender ambivalent or even negative feelings as employees wonder how the NHRP will affect them personally. For example, Fisher and Howell (2004) described the case of a specific practice such as the introduction of new HR self-service modules which was perceived by workers as requiring them to perform additional (and unrewarded) tasks that were previously handled by HR.

As mentioned in the Introduction, negative employee perceptions of NHRPs are not uncommon; indeed, Cantrell and Smith (2010) suggested that they are sometimes seen "more as a barrier to performance improvement than as an enabler" (p. 16). Such negative feelings toward NHRPs may be counterproductive for the organization in terms of lower productivity resulting from employee stress (Bacon and Blyton, 2005; Nishii *et al.*, 2008) and even turnover costs resulting from reduced employee commitment expressed through withdrawal behaviors (Fisher and Howell, 2004; van Dam, 2005).

We have found only a few studies that attempt to systematically identify the key factors in employee acceptance of NHRPs. Kossek (1989) found higher acceptance among workers with more seniority and/or higher position in the firm. More recent studies have suggested that positive responses may be fostered by: characterizing the NHRP as not threatening job security (Bacon and Blyton, 2005); accompanying it with a pay increase or other incentive (Bacon and Blyton, 2006); and clearly and prominently describing the NHRP's intentions to employees (Nishii *et al.*, 2008). Referring to HR practices in general, Cantrell and Smith (2010) found higher acceptance when such practices are geared to the characteristics of each employee work group in the firm. The reputation of the HR department within the firm may also be a factor in acceptance of HR practices (Ferris *et al.*, 2007). Finally, focussing specifically on employee acceptance of HR information systems, some studies have highlighted antecedents such as perceived organizational support and managerial pressure (Marler *et al.*, 2009), and organizational culture (Jones *et al.*, 2005).

Our study attempts to expand on this research by exploring how NHRP acceptance is influenced by two types of supportive behavior: that of top management and that of supervisors. Weick (1995) described sense-making as the process by which people confronted with a new and ambiguous situation are able to refer to their surroundings to make sense of and respond to the novel situation. NHRPs are, by definition, novel situations for employees. From a sense-making perspective, the acceptance of a NHRP will depend on the meanings employees attach to it, based on the cues in their organizational surroundings. Among those cues, the behavior of supervisors and managers will be important (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). The behavior of supervisors and managers is also important to the related construct of sense-giving – "the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). From a sense-giving perspective, they may orchestrate cues and attempt to manage the

meaning employees attach to organizational events and thus their response to such events (Stensaker *et al.*, 2008).

In addition to management behavior, the workplace environment in which NHRPs are introduced is also important. In particular, organizational climate may play a prominent role in influencing employee sense making (Robinson *et al.*, 2005). Thus, we will explore the influence of organizational climate on employee acceptance of NHRPs. Finally, in an attempt to discern connections among the variables of interest, we will explore the interplay between organizational climate and the support of top management and supervisors in terms of their joint effects on employee acceptance of NHRPs.

Top management support
While there is scant literature on the role of top management in HR implementation (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013), the role of top management in successful HR changes has been acknowledged (Boria-Reverter *et al.*, 2013; Tanure and Gonzalez-Duarte, 2007). Because of their elite status, top management behavior sends powerful messages to the workforce about the importance to the organization of the HR practice in question (Choi *et al.*, 2011; Klein *et al.*, 2001). In a case study, Stanton *et al.* (2010) observed that CEO commitment to HR provided links between organizational strategy and HR strategy, allowing employees to form positive associations with HRM and its outcomes. They concluded that top management behavior is a clear differentiator in the success of any HR activity. Cascio *et al.* (2010) suggest that top management support for a new organizational practice promotes acceptance by leading employees to think that the company is making improvements and striving to be successful in the long run. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) proposed that top managers are primary agents of sense-giving, possessing the ability to directly influence employees' thinking and attitudes. They documented a case in which the CEO first developed an abstract vision of the change and then disseminated it to employees, thereby influencing through sense-giving their understanding and acceptance of the change. Thus, we propose:

H1. Employees will display greater acceptance of NHRPs if they perceive greater top management support for the practices.

Supervisor support
Leadership research has extensively treated the influence of supervisors on how employees experience the workplace. Supervisor support, for example, has been found to be a main antecedent of job satisfaction (Griffin *et al.*, 2001). "Leader-member exchange" research has also highlighted that employees' productive behavior can often be understood as a function of the quality of their relationship with the supervisor (Alfes *et al.*, 2013). It has also been shown that, given the immediacy of their relationships with employees, supervisors are critical agents of the organization through which employees shape their perception of workplace events (Ertürk, 2008; Oreg and Berson, 2011). Although supervisors are not always HR specialists, they are charged with the delivery of HR practices (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Based on interview material, Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) concluded that most of the HR practices experienced by employees are those enacted by supervisors, implying a sort of "symbiotic relationship between [supervisors] and HR practices" (p. 16). More recently, McCarthy *et al.* (2013) echoed this conclusion by arguing that as HR policies cascade down the organizational hierarchy, line managers and supervisors become

important stakeholders in influencing how employees interpret and react to espoused HR policies.

Supervisors' actions may thus constitute important cues which help employees to make sense of NHRPs and generate expectations of responding positively to them (Tierney and Farmer, 2004). By displaying support, supervisors promote awareness of the NHRP, encourage employees to incorporate it into daily work processes (McCarthy *et al.*, 2013), and deliver signals about its significance for work unit goals (Townsend *et al.*, 2012).

Supervisors are also strong sense-giving agents. For example, Smith *et al.* (2010) showed how plant managers actively engaged in shaping the way subordinates viewed the organization and its values through what they called "everyday sense-giving activities" (e.g. daily walks in the plant or regular meals with subordinates). In the case of NHRPs, supervisors may influence employee responses by acting as "interpreters" of the practices, helping employees to contextualize them in their work unit and understand how the practices may improve the job experience and deliver individual benefits (Townsend *et al.*, 2012). This implies, of course, that supervisors' behavior may also be counterproductive, particularly if they lack understanding of the NHRPs or the analytical and functional skills required to enact them correctly, resulting in inconsistencies between intended and actual practices (Purcell and Kinnie, 2007). In any case, one would expect that:

H2. Employees will display greater acceptance of NHRPs when they perceive greater supervisor support for the practices.

Inconsistencies between top management and supervisor support
As illustrated in Cascio *et al.*'s (2010) study of the adoption of a sales force automation technology, consistently strong support for a NHRP by both supervisors and top managers sends a signal that the entire organization is committed to and is serious about the NHRP implementation. Consistent messages across all hierarchy layers also promote the understanding and application of HR processes (Stanton *et al.*, 2010).

However, the level of support shown by supervisory and management levels is not always equal. Top management may strongly support a NHRP while the supervisor does not, or vice versa. We argue that weak support by one of the two is likely not only to hinder acceptance, but also to negatively moderate the effect of support by the other part.

Consider a case in which top management support is strong but supervisor support is weak. Because, as mentioned, supervisors are charged with putting NHRPs into practice (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007), lack of supervisor support may lead employees to perceive the practice as neither essential nor valued. Such perceptions may reduce the effect of top management support for the NHRP. Conversely, since top management supportive behavior gives legitimacy to supervisors' endeavors (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004), weak top management support may lead employees to believe that the practice is not a priority to the firm. Consequently they may attach less value to the support shown by their supervisors. Thus, we propose:

H3a. Top management support of NHRPs has a weaker influence on employee acceptance if supervisor support is also weak.

H3b. Supervisor support of NHRPs has a weaker influence on employee acceptance if top management support is also weak.

Innovation climate

In addition to management behavior, a contextual cue that may facilitate NHRPs' acceptance is organizational climate – "the message employees get about what is important in the organization" (Schneider and Bowen, 1995, p. 239) based on the policies, practices, and procedures they experience on an ongoing basis (Dawson *et al.*, 2008). Organizational climate models the way employees build the meaning of workplace reality and events, thus guiding employee attitudes and behavior (Schneider and Bowen, 1995).

Of particular interest for the acceptance of NHRPs is the strength of an organization's innovation climate – the extent to which employees perceive that continuous improvement is important within the organization. If, for instance, an organization is strongly anchored to its routines, and its employees rarely experience alterations in standard work processes, then the innovation climate is likely to be weak. Conversely, if the organization values constant improvement and regularly introduces changes, such as upgrading of technology or improvements in work techniques, and its employees are relatively accustomed to experiencing change and realigning to novel organizational circumstances and procedures, then the innovation climate is likely to be strong.

Making (positive) sense of NHRPs may be a less demanding exercise for employees in strong innovation climates, where the introduction of these new practices is likely to be understood as a normal and appropriate organizational effort, consistent with the "way of doing things" in an organization that is habitually open to new ideas (Rogers, 1995). Acceptance may accordingly be a likely response. One should also expect that innovation climates will help attract and retain employees with more innovation friendly personalities, which will in turn increase the likelihood of positive response to NHRPs. Thus, we propose:

   H4. Employees will display greater acceptance of NHRPs if they perceive a stronger innovation climate within the organization.

Innovation climate's moderation effect

Organizational climate is rather stable over time and exerts a constant, though silent, influence on employee behavior (Dawson *et al.*, 2008). The silent character and constancy of climate suggest that, for NHRP acceptance, the importance of support activities by top management and supervisors may be contingent on climate. Because in weak innovation climates employees are less familiar with change and novel events such as NHRPs, one might expect that top management and supervisor support would be particularly important for employees to make sense of and respond to NHRPs. Thus, weak innovation climate may enhance the importance for NHRP acceptance of having supportive managers and supervisors. Conversely, in strong innovation climates, where employees are more prone to consider the introduction of NHRPs as "normal praxis," we may expect top management and supervisor support to be less important in shaping employee attribution of and response to new practices. A strong innovation climate, in other words, may have a substitution effect over other contextual enablers of acceptance. Thus, we propose:

   H5. When employees perceive a stronger innovation climate within the organization: (a) top management support and (b) supervisor support will exert a lower influence on their acceptance of NHRPs.

According to the hypotheses above, a proposed model is developed (Figure 1).
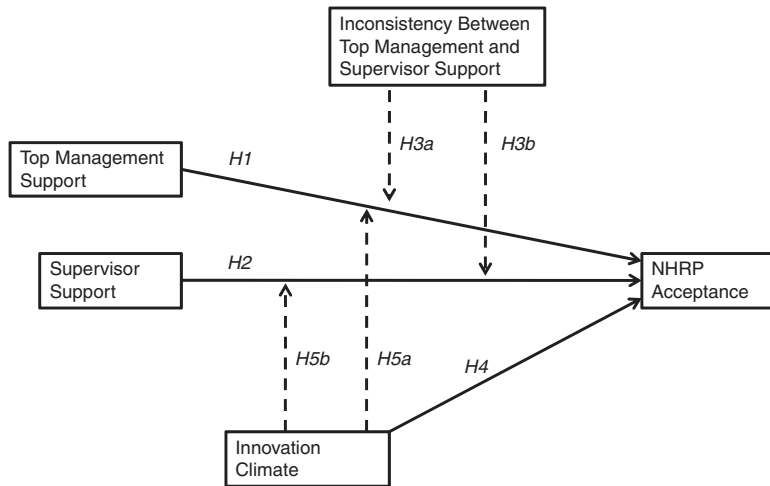
Figure 1.
The proposed model

Methodology

Sample

To test our hypotheses we adopted a field study methodology, surveying employees from nine workplaces located in Spain. Workplaces ranged in size from 700 to 8,000 employees and belonged to different industries (i.e. banking, insurance, social services, software, express carrier and package delivery, nutrition, electronics and telecommunications). Four of these workplaces were Spanish headquarters of multinational companies and five were subsidiaries of foreign multinationals. HR managers in each workplace were asked to identify up to four NHRPs that they had implemented in the previous year. A total of 36 NHRPs were identified. All the practices were championed by the HR department and aimed at non-managerial employees. (Details of the practices are presented in the next section.)

With the assistance of the HR department in each company, we randomly selected employees who were affected by the NHRPs identified. For each practice we selected 20 employees from the same department who answered only about that practice. This made a target sample for the nine workplaces of 720 employees (eighty employees per workplace).

Data collection

To collect the data, we first sent an e-mail to all employees in our sample inviting them to participate in an online survey. This e-mail informed employees about the content of the study, describing it as an examination of the characteristics of the implementation process of new HR practices in their firms. Prior to our e-mail, the HR director of each company informed the targeted employees of the importance of the survey to the company, emphasizing that the data would be received solely by an external constituency, and would be handled anonymously and exclusively for statistical purposes. A link in the e-mail text allowed employees to enter the questionnaire after logging in through a personal username and password provided by us. We automatically received completed questionnaires in an e-mail account created ad hoc. While survey questions were identical for all employees, the introduction to the survey was customized so that it mentioned the specific NHRP that

was appropriate to the respondent. Data were gathered during the months of September and October of 2010. A total of 434 employees answered the survey, representing a 61 percent response rate. Such an unusual response rate is justified by the fact that top management of the participant firms was highly committed to the study. The study itself was part of a larger research initiative aimed at exploring innovative HR practices and their linkages with corporate success. This research initiative, which was coordinated by a Spanish business school, was led by one of the CEOs of the companies involved, whose role was crucial in the recruitment of other companies for participating in the study.

In preparing the survey, we followed some of the strategies suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) to reduce the likelihood of common method bias, such as separating items measuring the same construct in the questionnaire, emphasizing that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers, and, as mentioned above, assuring respondent anonymity. We also asked HR managers of the nine workplaces to review the final wording of the survey items in order to assure that they were readable, clear and relevant to their workplace contexts.

Our sample size comprised 307 usable questionnaires (42.6 percent of the initial target sample). In all, 58 percent of the respondents were female and 42 percent were male. In total, 25 percent were age 35 or younger, 65 percent were between 36 and 50, and 10 percent were older than 50. Table I shows the 36 NHRPs introduced by the firms in the sample as well as the number of valid questionnaires received for each practice.

Measures
NHRP acceptance. Acceptance of new organizational practices can be conceptualized in a variety of ways (see Frambach and Schillewaert, 2002). What matters in the case of NHRPs is whether the employee has a positive perception of them, as this will influence their effectiveness (Nishii *et al.*, 2008). Drawing from research on employee responses to organizational innovations and organizational change, we defined acceptance as the extent to which employees feel positive about the NHRP. Specifically, acceptance was measured with a four-item scale adapted from previous research (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2005). The items were worded in rather generic terms so that they could be used to assess all the different NHRPs in our sample. The items selected were the following: "I like the way this practice is designed," "I want this practice to continue to be used in the future," "This practice is useful in improving the competitiveness of our company," and "This practice is useful in improving the way we work." Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale total score was the average of the four items' scores ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Top management support. This construct captures employee perceptions and it was measured through three items. Employees rated the extent to which they believed that top management: "has put all its support behind the new practice," "has stressed the importance of the new practice," "has encouraged us to embrace the new practice" (1 = very little; 5 = very much). The scale total score was the average of the three items' scores ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Supervisor support. Three items were used to measure this construct, which refers to employee perceptions. Employees rated the extent to which they believed that their immediate supervisor: "has shown high interest in the new practice," "has stressed the value of the new practice for the work unit," and "has actively pushed to make the new

	Practices	Number of valid questionnaires returned	Acceptance mean
Firm 1	1. Employee suggestion box	7	3.2
	2. Use of simulations in internal selection	15	3.4
	3. Competency-based appraisal system	6	3.3
	4. Flexible work schedule	9	3.9
Firm 2	5. 360 performance appraisal system	9	3.3
	6. E-HR administrative services	13	3.8
	7. Job rotation	11	4.4
	8. International exchange program for employees	11	4.5
Firm 3	9. Employee referral program	12	4.2
	10. Conflict management training	12	3.8
	11. Competency based appraisal system	11	3.6
	12. Mentoring program for high potentials	8	3.7
Firm 4	13. Profit-sharing program	5	4.4
	14. Flexible work schedule	7	4.5
	15. E-HR administrative services	10	3.9
	16. Mentoring program for high potentials	6	3.7
Firm 5	17. Disability awareness training for employees	9	4.3
	18. Work-life balance program	7	3.8
	19. Job rotation	8	2.9
	20. Self-managing work teams	5	3.1
Firm 6	21. 360 performance appraisal system	4	3.8
	22. Employee suggestion box	9	4.3
	23. Job enlargement	4	3.7
	24. Employee referral program	7	4.0
Firm 7	25. Competency based appraisal system	11	4.1
	26. E-HR administrative services	8	3.8
	27. Employee performance award	6	4.2
	28. Use of assessment centers in internal selection	8	3.6
Firm 8	29. Profit-sharing program	5	4.6
	30. Job enlargement	4	3.7
	31. Training on problem-solving methods	7	3.9
	32. Training for communication skills	7	3.5
Firm 9	33. New performance based pay system	12	3.8
	34. Self-managing work teams	12	4.2
	35. Work-life balance program	10	3.8
	36. Job enrichment	12	3.7

Notes: The low number of valid questionnaires for some NHRPs is due to the fact that we used listwise deletion for our analysis. Listwise deletion method drops all observations from subjects with missing data on any of the variables considered. Although it may result in sample attrition, in regression analyses (i.e. our statistical method, which we will present further on) listwise deletion has the advantage of allowing the estimation of the regression coefficients for each independent variable based on the same set of observations. For this reason, it is preferable to other methods for handling missing data (Allison, 2002)

Table I.
New HR practices introduced by the firms in the sample

practice a success" (1 = very little; 5 = very much). The scale total score was the average of the three items' scores ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Innovation climate. This construct captures employee perceptions. It was measured with a three-item scale. Respondents rated their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) with the following statements: "In my department/work

unit there is pressure to innovate and improve the way we work"; "My department/ work unit pursues the adoption of best management practices"; and "In my department/work unit, due to cultural and structural problems, it is very difficult to improve the way we do things" (reverse coded). The scale total score was the average of the three items' scores ($\alpha = 0.79$).

Control variables. In our analyses we controlled for the following variables: personal benefit derived from the new HR practice, personal innovativeness, employee gender, employee age, and firm.

Personal benefit was included in the analysis because employees may be more receptive to NHRPs when they anticipate positive outcomes for themselves from the practice (van Dam, 2005). Because the kind of practices considered could affect employees' chances of promotion, we controlled for perceived promotion opportunities provided by the practice as a potential personal benefit. Respondents rated their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) with the following statement: "This new HR practice improves my chances of promotion." We also controlled for the impact that the NHRP had on personal monetary remuneration. Respondents rated their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) with the following statement: "This new HR practice improves my monetary remuneration."

We measured personal innovativeness, which represents an individual tendency to respond positively to new organizational practices through a four-item scale adapted from Agarwal and Prasad (1998). On a five-point scale, employees were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following statements (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree): "I am generally cautious about accepting new ideas," "I rarely trust new ideas until I can see whether the vast majority of people around me accept them," "I am aware that I am usually one of the last people in my group to accept something new," and "I am reluctant to adopt new ways of doing things until I see them working for people around me." We computed the average of the items' scores to obtain the scale total score ($\alpha = 0.76$). A high score on this scale indicates weak personal innovativeness.

We also used gender as a control, as it has been found to affect response to new organizational practices (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). Gender was measured with a dummy variable (0 = male; 1 = female). Additionally, we controlled for respondent age, as individuals tend to become less open to innovations with age (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). Age was measured via an ordinal variable with three categories (1 = younger than 35; 2 = between 35 and 50; and 3 = older than 50). Finally, we used nine dummy variables to control for the firm where a given respondent was employed.

Following Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), we used Harman's one-factor test to examine whether the data suffered from common method bias. The unrotated factor solution yielded three factors with eigenvalues > 1.0 that accounted for 61.2 percent of the variance, while the largest factor did not account for a majority of the variance. This reduced the likelihood that common method variance was a problem in this study. The first factor (i.e. NHRP acceptance, top management support, supervisor support, and innovation climate) accounted for 25.5 percent of the variance; the second factor (i.e. impact on remuneration and promotion opportunities) accounted for 20.8 percent of the variance; and the third factor (i.e. personal innovativeness) accounted for 14.9 percent of the variance.

Analysis and results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table II.

As shown, the average level of acceptance of the different NHRPs was 3.8, with a standard deviation of 0.9. The minimum level of acceptance for an NHRP was 2.9 and the maximum was 4.6 (see Table I). Interestingly, there were cases where two very similar practices had rather different levels of acceptance (e.g. job rotation in firms 2 and 5).

Next, to test our hypotheses we carried out multilevel regression analyses allowing for random intercepts at the department level in order to account for group-level heterogeneity and non-independence of observations. Table III shows the results.

We started by regressing acceptance on the control variables (Model 1). As shown, promotion opportunities, impact on remuneration and personal innovativeness are significantly associated with acceptance, whereas gender and age are not. Next, we added our predictors to the regression while maintaining the control variables. In Model 2 we introduced top management (TM) and supervisor (S) support. The analysis indicates that both variables significantly predict acceptance, thus confirming $H1$ and $H2$. Models 3 and 4 were run to test $H3a$ and $H3b$. To this end, we first constructed a variable indicating the degree of inconsistency between top management and supervisor support. Such a variable is the result of the difference in absolute terms between top management and supervisor support. The higher the value of this variable, the larger the level of inconsistency. As shown in Model 3, this variable is not significantly associated with acceptance. Then, after mean-centering the variables in order to avoid multicollinearity, we introduced the interactions of this variable with top management support and supervisor support. As shown in Model 5, the interaction term with top management support is negatively and significantly related to acceptance. However, the interaction term with supervisor support is not significantly associated with acceptance. Hence, these findings confirm $H3a$ but not $H3b$. In Model 5 we introduced, as a predictor, innovation climate. As shown, results indicate a positive and significant association between climate and acceptance, thus supporting $H4$. Finally, in order to test $H5a$ and $H5b$, we introduced in Models 6 and 7, the interactions of climate with top management support and climate with supervisor support, respectively. All variables were first mean-centered. As expected, all of these interaction terms are negatively associated with acceptance. However, associations are very small and lack statistical significance, which lead us to reject $H5a$ and $H5b$.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. NHRP acceptance	3.8	0.9								
2. Gender	1.9	0.6	0.03							
3. Age	0.6	0.5	−0.08	0.18**						
4. Promotion opportunities	3.0	1.2	0.42**	0.11*	−0.07					
5. Impact on remuneration	2.3	1.2	0.34**	0.09	−0.06	57**				
6. Personal innovativeness	1.7	0.5	−0.17**	−0.02	0.02	0.01	0.10			
7. Top management support	3.4	0.9	0.48**	0.01	0.06	0.28**	0.17	−0.06		
8. Supervisor support	3.1	1.0	0.47**	0.10	0.02	0.44**	0.31*	−0.03	0.38**	
9. Innovation climate	3.7	0.7	0.41**	0.06	0.16**	0.30**	0.25**	−0.14**	0.28**	0.34**

Table II.
Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics

Notes: $n = 307$. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$ two-tailed

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Control variables							
Gender	-0.07	-0.06	-0.06	-0.08	-0.04	-0.04	-0.04
Age	-0.05	-0.10	-0.10	-0.13****	-0.14*	-0.14*	-0.15*
Promotion opportunities	0.20***	0.10**	0.10**	0.10**	0.09*	0.09*	0.09*
Impact on remuneration	0.08*	0.07*	0.07*	0.07*	0.06****	0.06****	0.09*
Personal innovativeness	-0.20**	-0.17*	-0.17*	-0.15*	-0.16*	-0.16*	-0.16*
Firm	Yes[a]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Independent variables							
TM support		0.26***	0.25***	0.30***	0.23***	0.23***	0.23***
S support		0.30***	0.32***	0.22**	0.28***	0.28***	0.28***
TM/S inconsistency			0.05	-0.06			
TM/S inconsistency × TM support				-0.16**			
TM/S inconsistency × S support				-0.04			
Innovation climate					0.20***	0.20***	0.20***
Innovation climate × TM support						-0.01	
Innovation climate × S support							-0.03
Variance components							
Individual level (SD)	0.7102386	0.5951691	0.5956866	0.5858125	0.5868552	0.5879152	0.5872766
Group (department) level (SD)	0.2747661	0.2389892	0.236118	0.2311753	0.2225612	0.2221124	0.2222978
Model Fit							
Wald χ^2	96.31***	241.97***	242.84***	263.78***	264.00***	263.21***	264.31***
LR test vs OLS	12.42***	10.93***	10.45***	10.78***	8.82***	8.67**	8.78**

Notes: $n = 307$. Unstandardized coefficients are shown. [a]Yes indicates that the firm dummy variables were included within the model. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; ****$p < 0.10$

Table III.
Multilevel regression
analyses

It is worth noting that, despite high correlations between some of the predictors, VIF values ranged from 1.1 to 1.9, suggesting that multicollinearity effects were not influencing the regressions. Also, likelihood ratio tests confirm that multilevel random-intercepts models fit the data significantly better than standard OLS regressions.

Additional analyses

Despite their widespread use, difference scores – which we used to test *H3a* and *H3b* – are prone to some methodological problems (Edwards, 2002). Particularly, in our case their potential low reliability may affect the testing of *H3a* and *H3b*. Hence, we carried out some additional analyses without using difference scores to further validate our results.

First, following Edwards (2002), we have performed a polynomial regression (Table IV).

As shown in Table IV, the surface test a_4, which indicates how discrepancy between top management and supervisor support relates to acceptance, is positive and non-significant, suggesting that inconsistency per se does not matter much for acceptance. This is consistent with the findings we obtained through multilevel regression analyses, which also indicate a positive and non-significant association between top management and supervisor support inconsistency and acceptance (Table III, Model 4). Such results apparently suggest that our measure of inconsistency is reliable, thus validating our tests of *H3a* and *H3b*.

	Model 1
Control variables	
Gender	−0.06
Age	−0.10
Promotion opportunities	0.10**
Impact on remuneration	0.07*
Personal innovativeness	−0.17**
Firm	Yes[a]
Independent variables	
TM support	0.29***
S support	0.33***
TM support squared	−0.01
TM support × S support	−0.04
S support squared	0.03
Variance components	
Individual level	0.5966509
Group (department) level	0.2356154
Model fit	
Wald χ^2	243.3***
LR test vs OLS	10.44***
Surface tests	
a_1	0.62***
a_2	−0.03
a_3	−0.03
a_4	0.06

Table IV.
Multilevel polynomial regression analysis

Notes: $n = 307$. Unstandardized coefficients are shown; [a]Yes indicates that the firm dummy variables were included within the models. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

As an additional test to validate our analyses, we have run a multilevel regression using only the sub-sample of employees ($n = 164$) for whom the variable "inconsistency" took a value higher than 1 (i.e. those employees that perceived at least some inconsistency between the levels of top management and supervisor support). The results appear in Table V.

As shown in Table V, for this sub-sample the effect of top management support on acceptance considerably decreases and becomes non-significant, while the effect of supervisor support is maintained. These findings appear to fit well with our results regarding *H3a* and *H3b* obtained through difference scores and, in our opinion, give them additional support.

Discussion

Over the past two decades, research has offered very encouraging findings about the effect of HR practices on firm performance. Yet, more recent studies show that for HR practices to produce expected results, they need to be accepted by employees (e.g. Nishii *et al.*, 2008). Accordingly, it is important to investigate the circumstances under which new HR practices are most likely to be accepted.

This study offers an examination of some contextual factors influencing acceptance of NHRPs. Drawing on the sense-making/sense-giving perspective, we argued that such environmental cues as top management support, supervisor support and organizational climate may facilitate positive attributions for these new practices by employees, thus promoting acceptance. Our empirical analyses conducted on an original sample of employees from nine workplaces in Spain confirm our arguments.

As for top management support, while its role in the success of organizational innovations has been widely examined (e.g. Klein *et al.*, 2001), so far relatively few researchers have explored its influence on the success of NHRPs (e.g. Stanton *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) have recently marked the consequences of top management support for HR implementation as a promising area for future

	Model 1
Control variables	
Gender	−0.09
Age	−0.25*
Promotion opportunities	0.16**
Impact on remuneration	0.03*
Personal innovativeness	−0.20****
Firm	Yes[a]
Independent variables	
TM support	0.10
S support	0.17**
Variance components	
Individual level	0.6468448
Group (department) level	0.2712225
Model fit	
Wald χ^2	62.35***
LR test vs OLS	4.33**

Notes: $n = 164$. Unstandardized coefficients are shown. [a]Yes indicates that the firm dummy variables were included within the model. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$; ****$p < 0.10$

Table V.
Multilevel regression analysis with the sub-sample of employees that perceived at least some inconsistency between top management and supervisor support

research. Our study takes a step toward understanding such consequences, suggesting that top management support for NHRPs is likely to positively influence employees' perceptions of them. Our analysis also contributes to the literature by highlighting the effects of supervisor support on employee reactions to NHRPs. Recent research has indicated that supervisors have a major responsibility in enacting the firm's HR practices (e.g. Townsend *et al.*, 2012). We add to this research by showing that employee acceptance of NHRPs is significantly influenced by supervisor behavior. Our analysis thus suggests that for employees to respond positively to NHRPs, it is important that they perceive commitment from both top management and supervisors.

In addition, the study explores the previously neglected question of the relative influence of top management vs supervisor support upon employee acceptance. In particular, we focussed on how inconsistencies between the two affect acceptance, and we found that low supervisor support for NHRPs negatively moderates the effect of top management support. Figure 2 represents this effect. Conversely, and contrary to what we expected, if supervisors are supportive of NHRPs, they will be able to influence acceptance even when top management support is weak.

These findings might be explained by the fact that, compared to top management, supervisors have a greater cognitive influence over employees because of the closeness of their relationship (Redman and Snape, 2005). As argued by Purcell and Hutchinson (2007), supervisors are seen as the main agents of the organization. Accordingly, they are capable of shaping employee perceptions about what is important and what is not. Moreover, research has shown that employee commitment to the supervisor may be even greater than that to the organization (Becker *et al.*, 1996). Such a prominent role of supervisors would explain why they still influence employee acceptance of NHRPs even in presence of low top management support, and why the effect of top management support is noticeably diminished by unsupportive supervisors, as Figure 2 indicates. In our study, supervisors played a pivotal role in NHRP implementation. For example, in implementing a flexible work schedule NHRP,
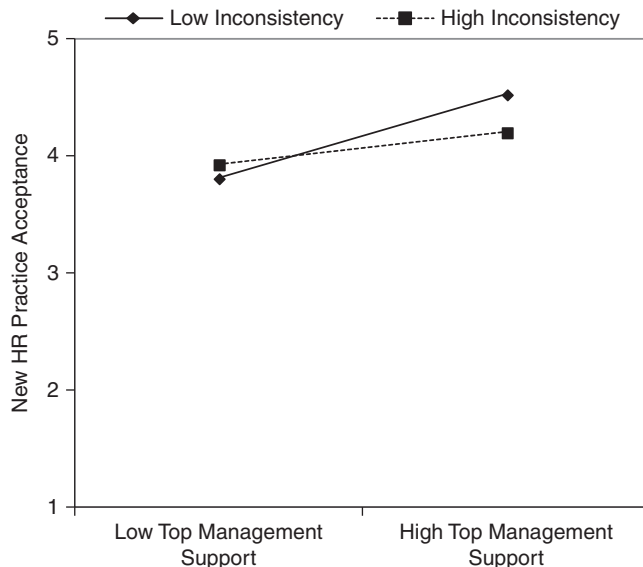

Figure 2.
The moderation effect of the inconsistency between top management and supervisor support on the effect of top management support

supervisors clarified expectations for employees interested in adopting it, ensured the compatibility of each employee's proposed flexible schedule with that of other team members, and monitored its impact on their units. In implementing a competency-based appraisal NHRP, supervisors needed to introduce the initiative to employees in their unit, outline the employee contributions necessary to making the appraisal process effective, and devote sufficient time to sit with employees, identify improvement areas, draft competency-based training needs, and the like. In sum, the role of supervisors was crucial for the effective implementation of the NHRPs.

Finally, we contribute to the literature by investigating the effect on acceptance of innovation climate. Our findings suggest that a strong innovation climate may favorably predispose employees toward NHRPs and facilitate acceptance. However, we found that a strong innovation climate does not negatively moderate the effect of the other predictors. While contrary to what we hypothesized, this finding is nonetheless interesting. It suggests that both top management support and supervisor support are important acceptance enablers independently of climate setting, and that, as such, they should be a given in all workplaces. In a weak innovation climate, they may be essential for employees to make sense of an unusual event (i.e. the NHRP) and reduce the uncertainty associated with it. In strong innovation climate, where employee exposure to innovations is high, they may signal the importance of the NHRP.

At the practical level, our findings suggest that managers cannot take for granted employee acceptance of NHRPs. Our findings may be of particular interest for HR managers, as they suggest that NHRPs that do not receive visible top management and supervisor support are likely to gain little acceptance, no matter how well designed they are or how well they address the needs of the organization and its employees. Our findings also suggest that employees perceive support signals from these two agents not only individually but also in conjunction. In particular, supervisor support of NHRPs is crucial. This being the case, top management should work with supervisors to ensure their commitment to such new practices. Supervisor commitment may be enhanced through meetings prior to the introduction of NHRPs to describe a new practice's rationale, or even earlier through the involvement of supervisors at the design stage. Clear communication between HR decision makers and supervisors is thus pivotal so that supervisors clearly understand the new practice and are equipped with the analytical and functional skills required to carry out their critical role of delivering a clear message to the staff about its significance and value. Finally, although our findings show that workplaces with strong innovation climate may enjoy some advantages when it comes to introducing NHRPs, it may be a mistake to believe that innovation climate can be a substitute for management and supervisor support.

The study also suggests areas for future research. For example, while we analyzed some factors leading to acceptance, we could not explore the effect of acceptance on the intended outcomes of NHRPs. Future studies should analyze this point. Another important issue for future research may be the effect of acceptance on employee attitudes, such as commitment and job satisfaction. From our study we cannot conclude that higher acceptance is conducive to improved employee attitudes. Neither can we conclude that employee acceptance of a NHRP is the same as employee satisfaction with the practice (employees may accept a NHRP and yet they may not be satisfied with it). Future research should analyze how acceptance of NHRPs relates to satisfaction with NHRPs. Furthermore, it may be interesting to examine other contextual enablers of NHRP acceptance besides those considered in this study, such as the kind of relationship between supervisors and employees. "Leader-member

exchange" may indeed influence employees' response to change (Oreg and Berson, 2011). It may also be interesting to study acceptance under different levels of firm competitiveness. It is possible, for example, that employees will more readily accept NHRPs (even unattractive ones) if the firm is experiencing hard times. Future research may also study in-depth acceptance of specific NHRPs. It is possible that the importance of the predictors we identified varies depending on the NHRPs. It is also worth to be further explored the reasons why similar practices had marked differential acceptance levels across different firms (e.g. job rotation in firms 2 and 5, Table I). Besides our acceptance predictors, other factors may also explain these differences. For example, the idiosyncratic design of the practices in each firm may play a role in determining employees' response, implying that there may be effective and not so effective ways to design a practice *vis-à-vis* acceptance. Specific features of the organizational settings in which the practices are introduced may also be relevant to explain their acceptance. For instance, a given practice may be received differently by employees depending on its perceived consistency with the firm's organizational culture. Finally, it may be interesting to study processes that promote employee acceptance of NHRPs, which would require a more qualitative approach.

The study is not without limitations, which demand some caution and point to further issues for future research. First, we used a single source to gather information on our dependent and independent variables, which presents threats of bias arising from common method variance. Although the Harman's one factor test reduced our concerns regarding this problem, it does not exclude the problem entirely. A second limitation is related to the fact that we used cross-sectional data. Thus, we cannot rule out reverse causalities between our dependent and independent variables, though rationales presented about causations appear sound. A third limitation relates to our sample, which was limited to nine large companies in Spain. Accordingly, one must exercise caution in generalizing the findings beyond sampled firms. Finally, due to listwise deletion of missing data, for some NHRPs we could count on a limited number of valid questionnaires. There was no specific pattern in the distribution of the missing data. Thus, the low number of valid questionnaires for some practices should not undermine the generalizability of our results to sampled firms.

Conclusion

Recent developments in SHRM research have distinctly indicated that the link between HR practices and performance cannot take place unless the practices are viewed positively by their recipients, that is, the employees. The present study makes a unique contribution to the literature by investigating some contextual factors influencing acceptance of NHRPs, and by doing so it also suggests possible ways to introduce them more effectively. The time is right to further develop this research field. We hope that this study will help pave the way.

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Further Reading

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