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## Special issue of *International Journal of Human Resource Management*: It's never a straight line: advancing knowledge on HRM implementation

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## Special issue of *International Journal of Human Resource Management*: It's never a straight line: advancing knowledge on HRM implementation

'The ability to implement strategies is, itself, a resource that can be a source of sustained strategic advantage' (Barney, 2001, p. 54)

To our knowledge, within seven years, this is the fourth Special Issue into conceptual and empirical discoveries in successful HRM implementation. In 2011, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* published a set of interesting pioneering papers on 'Comparative Perspectives on HR and Line Manager Relationships and their Effects on Employees'. In 2013, *Human Resource Management* followed with a set of papers about 'Human Resource Management and the Line'. Recently, in 2017 the *European Journal of International Management* offered its pages to the papers about 'HRM Implementation Effectiveness in Europe'. Yet, we decided to call again for manuscripts about HRM implementation as we believed that this topic is far from being fully explored and understood.

With complete acknowledgement to our colleagues, guest editors of earlier special issues, we cannot but notice that in all instances, the focus so far has been primarily on the relationship between line managers and HRM professionals. Thus, we took a new stand and put forward three goals for this Special Issue: to explore contributions of multiple actors in HRM implementation apart from HRM professionals and line managers; to offer a broader conceptualization of HRM implementation success that goes beyond its effectiveness and to differentiate between successful *implementation* of HRM and the success of HRM by and large in organizations.

Since the seminal article of Bowen and Ostroff (2004), much scholarly attention has been devoted to employees' perceptions of HRM practices. At the same time, scholars mostly focused their attention on a linear predictable process of HRM implementation (for overviews, see in this issue Mirfakhar, Trullen, & Valverde; Van Mierlo, Bondarouk, & Sanders). HRM implementation is seen by one stream of scholars as the process of translating intended practices into actual practices, and by others as a more iterative process that includes and sometimes is blended with the design of HRM practices and policies. As we wrote in the Call for papers for this Special Issue (Bondarouk, Trullen, & Valverde, 2016), the managerial responsibility for HRM implementation also varies with perspectives on what HRM implementation is, from the translation of intended to actual HR practices by line managers, to multiple actors when it is viewed as a multi-staged process.

How HRM implementation *effectiveness* is defined also varies to a great extent. Common approaches view that HRM implementation is effective when implemented HRM practices are equal to intended ones; or when desired employees

outcomes are attained (employee commitment, abilities or employee satisfaction with HRM practices). We observe a great deal of discrepancies in how authors (implicitly) define HRM implementation and how they measure its effectiveness. For example, Guest & Bos-Nehles (2013) and Khilji & Wang (2006) considered the actual implementation of HRM by line managers as the end point of HRM implementation, while they measured its effectiveness by the 'intended-actual HRM' match and by achievements of desired employee outcomes. Regardless of how effectiveness is measured, most articles state that without good (effective, high or strong) HRM implementation, desired employee outcomes cannot be attained or only to a limited extent.

Papers selected for this HRM implementation special issue have three unique features: (i) they take perceptions and behaviors of multiple HRM actors into account, (ii) they emphasize the dynamic nature of the HRM implementation process with recursive feedback and feedforward loops and (iii) they acknowledge the progressive evolving nature of HRM implementation. This special issue offers a variety of definitions of HRM implementation, depending on the theoretical background and level of analysis the authors suggest in each paper. While enjoying this variety, we propose our own definition of HRM implementation that emphasizes its dynamic process, in which targeted managers at all levels and employees understand newly introduced HRM practices, become familiar with it and influence it:

*HRM implementation is the translation process in which HR practices are incorporated into daily organisational life by HR professionals, targeted managers and employees, through the design, introduction, application, experience and perception, but also subsequent evaluation, redesign and reintroduction of the HR practices.*

## **Theoretical and methodological diversity**

We received 12 manuscripts, from which we have selected seven for this issue. We selected these seven on the basis of three main criteria: (1) their quality – they all went through regular blind peer-review, (2) the extent to which implementation was a central concern in the paper and finally (3) on the basis of their originality in pushing forward new theoretical approaches and methodologies into the field. Articles that could not be included in the special issue instead often were discarded on the basis of low fit, as they only touched upon implementation issues in a peripheral way.

Based on *Social Exchange Theory*, Bos-Nehles and Meijerink view HRM implementation as a social process that depends on a social exchange relationship between line managers, HRM professionals and employees. The paper uses two conceptualizations of social exchange: one focusing on line managers' perceived organizational support, which reflects the relationship between the line and the organization (where the HR department plays a crucial role), and another focusing on leader-member exchange, which tackles the exchange relationship between line managers and employees in their units. The paper concludes that social exchanges between these different actors in the organization are needed for employees to perceive the existence of the practices, which affects the effectiveness of their implementation and employees' affective commitment. The relationship between supervisors or line managers and employees is further investigated in two more

papers. Straub, Vinkenburg, Van Kleef and Hofmans use *signaling theory* to argue that, with their behaviors, supervisors send out signals to their employees that shape how these make sense of their working environments. By actively supporting employees during the implementation of a new HR practice (in their case, a work--life intervention), the authors show that supervisors play a crucial role in influencing employees' overall work-home culture perceptions, which in turn affects the firm turnover. The *AMO model* (abilities, motivation, opportunities to implement HRM) has inspired Van Waeynberg and Decramer to examine HRM implementation as experienced satisfaction with HRM by line managers and employees. Focusing on one particular HR policy, performance management, they show how line managers' AMO is positively associated with employees' satisfaction with the policy, which in turn is mediated by perceptions that the performance management system is strong, hence building in turn on the concept of HRM system strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) to conceptualize effective implementation. Drawing on the concept of *Social Power*, Budjanovcanin show that HRM implementation is not only carried out in a top-down fashion, and that employees can significantly shape their direct experience of HRM with their own actions. In particular, they show that despite lacking legitimate position power to influence HRM processes, employees can draw on a variety of power sources and influence tactics to influence their work environments and find ways best suited to their own needs to fill into the implementation/interpretation gaps. Using the *Theory of Planned Behavior*, Vargas, Yurova, Ruppel, Tworoger and Greenwood conceptualize HRM implementation as individual's decision to adopt a new HRM practice, which in their study is the use of HR analytics by HR professionals. The authors decompose the decision making process that leads to the adoption of an HRM innovation, distinguishing between the knowledge, persuasion and decision stages. On the basis of their theory, they identify the different barriers that often prevent HR professionals from adopting these tools. Van Mierlo et al. build on *Structuration Theory* to develop a comprehensive framework to assist HRM scholars in understanding the dynamics of HRM implementation. On the basis of that theory, they argue that HRM implementation is less linear and one directional than commonly depicted, as HRM practices need to become inscribed into the interpretive schemes of organisational actors, resources have to be distributed, and the HRM practice has to gain legitimacy before it is effectively implemented. Rather than talking about implementation gaps in a static form, they advocate for a more dynamic and processual view of implementation from a multi-actor perspective. Finally, Mirfakhar et al. review the literature on HRM implementation to answer the question of what factors contribute to the effective implementation of HRM policies and practices. Conceptualizing the introduction of new HRM practices as an instance of change, they adopt Pettigrew's *strategic change framework*, which acknowledges the relevance of content, context and process elements in shaping a change process.

Empirical papers in the Special Issue are also diverse in terms of their methodology. Bos-Nehles & Meijerink and Van Waeynberg & Decramer adopt a multi-level perspective as they address predictors of line managers implementation behaviors (at the group level) as well as outcomes of these behaviors on employees' experiences of HRM (at the individual level). The contribution by Straub et al. uses a pre-test and post-test longitudinal design to assess the impact of a new work-life balance HRM policy within a professional services firm. The research spans an interval of two years with data collection at three points in time, and show the causal link

between supervisors' implementation behaviors and the outcomes of the intervention. Vargas et al. test their model of HR analytics adoption with structural equation modeling, and then develop a map that shows the relative importance and performance of determinants of individual adoption by HR professionals. Finally, Budjanovcanin adopt a qualitative methodology and reach their conclusions on employees' agency in HRM implementation through 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews with lawyers working in London-based law firms that shared similar characteristics.

In addition to their conceptual and methodological diversity, the papers selected are also diverse in other respects. For example, if we pay attention to the different stages of the implementation process (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013), we can observe articles that look at the decision to adopt a particular policy (Vargas et al., this issue), at the quality of implementation once practices are introduced by line managers (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink; Straub et al.; Van Waeynberg & Decramer; this issue) as well as at the reactions of employees (Budjanovcanin this issue). Papers are also diverse in the role that they attribute to different actors with some papers focusing on HR professionals (Vargas et al., in this issue), others on line managers and employees (again, Straub et al.; Van Waeynberg & Decramer; this issue), others on HR professionals, managers and employees (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, this issue) or, in the case of the Van Mierlo et al. and Mirfakhar et al., at an even larger variety of actors (such as those mentioned, but also senior managers, or trade unions).

### **Emergent themes, or – what is so special about HRM implementation?**

With this Special Issue we hope to raise scholars' interest in the topic of HRM implementation, making it part of the HRM scholarship agenda, as it happens with other HRM process-related topics such as HRM attributions or HRM system strength. Despite increasing work on the role of line managers in delivering HRM, or the differences between intended, actual and experienced practices (Van Mierlo et al., this issue), the fact is that HRM scholarship has – in comparison to other fields, such as strategy – tended to minimize the relevance of process-related issues in HRM research, often considering that implementation would simply follow from adoption (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013). In addition, there is a great deal of confusion around what HRM implementation means, as well as a clear lack of consolidation of prior research, which often treats implementation issues only secondarily (Mirfakhar et al., this issue). Hence, there is still a great deal of work to be done before HRM implementation can find its 'place in the sun' in the HRM community. We hope that with this Special Issue we are contributing to create that niche, suggesting several directions for future research, and legitimizing the (often messy) study of HRM implementation as noble enterprise.

There are several areas for improvement and further exploration within HRM implementation research. Following Guest (2011), as well as Budjanovcanin (2018, this issue), we call for more research that analyzes the introduction of new HRM policies since their inception until they become routinized within the organization. We lack more longitudinal research that overcomes the often ahistorical and acontextual nature of HRM work. Such type of research would most likely need to use mixed research methods (see for example, Woodrow & Guest, 2014), and acknowledge the multi-actor and complex nature of some implementation processes.

We also call for more research that takes context into account (Cooke, 2018). Whether HRM is implemented successfully not only depends on the content of the practice or policy or how it is introduced, but also very importantly on the specific context in which is adopted (Mirfakhar et al., this issue). Micro (such as organizational actors' pre-existing beliefs or skills), mezzo (e.g. climate) and macro (e.g. industry) contextual factors may directly affect the chances of effective implementation as well as interact with HRM implementation champions' own efforts.

Future research would fruitfully incorporate as well a diversity of theoretical perspectives. This Special Issue is a good example of the variety of theoretical perspectives that can be used in implementation research. Even though conceptual approaches such as AMO theory, social exchange or perceived organizational support are the common suspects when dealing with line managers' HRM implementation (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2012; Trullen et al., 2016), as research expands beyond the role played by supervisors and considers implementation from a sociological (in addition to a socio-psychological) perspective, other theoretical lenses may also be brought forward such as discourse, power, micro-politics or institutional theory. Having said that, there is still room for more work focusing on the line manager–employee relationship. In particular, work that incorporates leadership research in the context of HRM implementation would be key. While we know that leadership and HRM interact in defining HRM effectiveness (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007), we still lack more knowledge that connects certain leadership behaviors with different implementation outcomes.

Finally, we encourage future work that broadens rather than narrows down our understanding of implementation as such. As noted by scholars such as Mintzberg (1987, 1990) or March (Baier, March, & Saetren, 1986), formulation and implementation of policies are confounded in real life, and hence implementation processes are necessarily iterative and dynamic (Van Mierlo et al., this issue). This means that attempts at defining implementation as a 'stage' of the innovation process that concludes when actual practices resemble intended ones, are as useful as overtly simplistic. While there is a need for a common understanding of implementation, there is also the risk of defining the phenomenon in such narrow terms that it discourages scholarly interest in the topic.

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