

# Accommodating Human Diversity in HR Design

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## ABSTRACT

*Organisations have always been striving for higher performance from their employees. The later half of the twentieth century witnessed massive literature endorsing the 'human element' to be a source of sustained competitive advantage, leading to a shift in the primary HRM focus from tasks to people. Accordingly, HR managers are increasingly compelled to design practices that have the ability to attract, retain and engage competent employees. However, even the much acclaimed High Performance Work Practices (HPWP), could not provide credible solutions in the wake of organisations going global, multi-cultural, multi-generational and gender-inclusive. Building up on this, the paper is an effort to explore through existing literature the rationale for introducing an element of flexibility while framing HR practices, which shall be able to handle employment dynamics much more responsibly.*

**Keywords:** HRM, High Performance Work Systems, Idiosyncratic Deals, Customisation

## INTRODUCTION

*“People are definitely a company’s greatest asset. It doesn’t make any difference whether the product is cars or cosmetics. A company is only as good as the people it keeps.” – Mary Kay Ash*

In the present contemporary times, characterised by rapid expansion of global markets, fast-paced technological innovations and a dynamic business environment, organisations are hard-pressed to perform and embrace change, which is both, rapid and perpetual. These challenges

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have rendered the tangible sources - capital and technology, as traditional sources of competitive advantage, and instead the intangibles in the form of human capital, have assumed a pivotal role and are increasingly considered to provide an unparalleled source of competitive advantage (Wright et al., 1994). Having identified the human element as an 'invisible advantage' (Low & Kalafut, 2002), the success of any organisation would depend on its ability to attract, develop and retain individuals who are enterprising enough to pioneer and capitalise on promising opportunities. One of the ways to attract and retain talented force is by providing them flexibility at work as the need for choice is biologically motivated (Leotti & Delgado, 2011) and each choice, big or small, routine or strategic, reinforces a feeling of control which affects the perception of an individual about his/her well-being (Bandura et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Several works (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Patall, Cooper & Robinson, 2008; Patall, Cooper & Wynn, 2010) have concluded that when employees are allowed to express choices, they feel motivated and perform better. Additionally, it is observed that flexibility is not driven by employees but by the firm's policies and industry norms. However, in most organizations, the working conditions, salary structures and employee schemes are generic and static in nature. This practice discourages high-potential employees who seek freedom and prefer to choose their conditions. Thus, treating employees as a generic category may not be an ideal solution as the standardised manner of managing goes against the very desire of human beings to be treated and recognised as individuals (Lawler & Fingold, 1999).

In this light, the paper through an exhaustive literature review has identified trends which call for a progression in HR practices from generalisation to customisation. These issues are recommended to be addressed by HR practitioners while framing HR practices so that employees stay positive, motivated and engaged.

## LITERARY BACKGROUND

Theories on managing the human resource have witnessed a phenomenal transition. The early management theories, influenced by Taylor's scientific management principles, had their prime focus on production, totally neglecting the human element, and thereby invited severe criticism. Later Hawthorne experiments led by Elton Mayo (Mayo, 1993), laid the foundation of the human relations movement and became the premises for the development of contemporary motivational theories. However,

perceptions changed dramatically after the publication by Barney in 1991, wherein he proposed the resource-based view (RBV), which became the basis for the VRIO framework. Building on the VRIO framework, Wright, Mac Mahan and Mc Williams (1994), argued that it is only the human resource that conforms to all the four criteria - they add value, are rare, inimitable and non-substitutable. Having realised that human resources is strategically important and worthy enough of investment of time, resources and effort, it's time that organisations focus on effective HR practices that best leverage this crucial asset. With this recognition, sets of HR practices that were believed to be performance enhancing were introduced over time by researchers and/or practitioners. Based on a broad base of a thousand companies across different industries, Huselid (1995) advocated for 'High-Performance Work Practices' (HPWP) having an impact on corporate financial performance. This has been the most cited work so far in exploring the relationship between HPWP and firm performance. It changed the direction of HR research and provided a sound base for performance-based HR practices. The next few years witnessed many more such studies which were more sector-specific and presented empirical evidence on the performance effects of not only individual practices but also of bundles of reinforcing HR practices. Equally promising results were reported by Arthur (1994) and Inchniowski et al. (1997) across steel mills, by Mc Duffie (1995) in the auto industry, Delery and Doty (1996) in banking. These results were reconfirmed by Combs et al. (2006) in a meta-analytical study, concluding that the increasing use of HPWPs by one standard deviation increases performance by .20 of a standard deviation making the concept managerially relevant. Sung and Ashton (2005), in their report which brought together the results of ten case studies also concluded that the adoption of HPWPs was capable of producing a range of positive organisational outcomes. The study by Appealbaum et al. (2000), was another landmark in the area, trying to find empirical evidence on the magnitude of performance gains through the adoption of HPWPs.

Despite the voluminous literature, there was a lack of consensus not only the list of HR practice which are considered performance-enhancing, but even with the usage of a particular HR practice (Becker & Gerhart, 1996). Boselie et al. (2005), argued that a lack of theoretical rationale for selecting practices to be included within the ambit of HRM is probably the main reason for the lack of agreement among researchers. Their study included a list of 26 HR practices which they selected through an iterative process in their analysis of 104 articles. Similar methodology using frequencies was used in the study by Posthuma et al. (2013), based

on an extensive literature search over the period 1992 through 2011. They found a mention of 61 practices used by different researchers, which they then grouped into nine categories. Though their broad and comprehensive taxonomy has added conceptual clarity, yet the specific composition of HR practices which are performance enhancing remained debatable.

Besides the uncertainty surrounding the precise list of HR practices, an equally important issue is the way management designs the HR practices with an inherent optimistic assumption that the HR practices so advocated are “good” for the employees, with virtually no groundwork on what is required by them. The extant literature has largely ignored the individual heterogeneity that exists amongst employees (Wright & Nishii, 2007). Employees are individuals who differ significantly across various dimensions such as age, gender, education, religion, socio-economic status, personality, life stage, aspirations and/or what they are looking for in the job, and this influences how they react to HR practices. Thus, it is time, that organisations no longer view employees as a homogeneous entity, and rather treat them as individuals with different abilities, needs and motivations to work. This obviously calls for the customisation of HR practices. All of us, as consumers, are witnessing the way organisations are customising their products, and progressing from mass marketing to personalised marketing. The trend is almost universal - be it a product or service. This strategy has paid off well, and it shall revolutionise the HR function if the principles of customisation learned from marketing are applied to people practices. Employees - the ultimate customer of HR offerings, are expecting the same from their organisations (Rousseau, 2001). This calls for reshaping the HR function from an altogether different perspective - an approach quite different from the one-size-fits-all approach.

## **RATIONALE FOR CUSTOMISATION**

In recent years, owing to proliferation of research studies trying to establish promising relationship between HPWPs and better organisational performance, HR departments are expected to play a much more strategic role (Ulrich, 1996). The role of HR is no longer limited to performing only administrative mundane tasks like selecting, training, compensation and the like, but are expected to come up with practices to tap the human resource to its full potential (Lepak & Snell, 1998). Recognising employees

as a critical resource brings into focus the notion of employees as human capital, which shifts the primary HRM focus from tasks to people (Cardy et al., 2007). Having approved of employees as a source of competitive advantage, it becomes necessary to understand certain attributes, which are not only unique but are also responsible for conditioning their behaviour. Some of the attributes are an inherent part of their personality, while others have been adapted over time consequent to changes in society. A rigorous analysis of such trends highlight the pressing need to move towards customisation of HR practices.

### **Complex Human Behaviour**

The main challenge with people management is their complex behaviour, which is unique and unpredictable, making its management a complicated affair. The complexity of human behaviour is further enhanced by the fact that human beings do possess discretion or some degree of choice on how well to do or not to do a particular task/job. Baring a few jobs which are highly mechanical or routinised, individuals can and do use their discretion in deciding the effectiveness with which to perform their assigned roles. Discretionary behaviour means making some sort of choices in delivering organisational duties over and above what is expected or the minimum required to be in job. The concept of discretionary behaviour was brought forward by Bailey in 1993 and became a focal point in contemporary research after the publication by Appelbaum and her colleagues in 2000. Apart from few employees who have high intrinsic motivation to perform well, most other employees shall use their discretion in favour of high performance only if they get something in return. Having established that discretionary behaviour plays a pivotal role in enhancing organisational performance, we in our endeavour to higher performance through employees seek to find what stimulates positive discretionary behaviour in individuals.

### **Employee Diversity**

Employees are individuals, distinct entities, possessing a set of biographical and psychological characteristics which are not only unique, but also play a major role in influencing their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. Employee diversity is not a recent phenomenon, but the issue never generated heat as it was assumed that employees would blend in to fit

into the organisation. This melting pot approach, as it is popularly known as, might have dealt with the diversity issue well in the past, but has failed to accommodate the increasing diversity in workforce. Standardised HR practices fail to endorse this diversity and therefore cannot be taken as an ideal approach to deal with all or even most of the employees (Lawler, 1974). This requires organisations to equip themselves with discrete and more flexible employment contracts which are better at dealing with a diverse workforce, as individuals differ in their abilities and in what they desire from work (Lawler & Finegold, 2000).

Diversity in the workplace brings with it different perspectives, which can be tapped towards organisational success. It's time to rethink HRM from the perspective of managing diversity, examine the implications of heterogeneous organisational practices and their influence on organisational performance (Benschop, 2001). But the task is not as easy as it sounds to be. The more people are treated as individuals, the more complex the organisation becomes (Lawler, 1974). It would require negotiation of employment conditions at a very micro level (Guest, 2007). This, though not impossible shall make the task of HR department very difficult. But, nonetheless, it's time to address this issue with much more vigour than ever before.

### **Employee as a Consumer**

The studies by Barney (1991) and Wright et al. (1994), have established the supremacy of the human element in any organisation. Having endorsed employees as a critical resource coupled with the increasingly competitive turbulent markets, the success of any firm depends on its ability to attract, retain and engage competent employees. With firms competing for the top talent, HR managers are increasingly compelled to rethink like marketers, quite the same as is done for products and services (Maurer & Liu, 2007). With the intent to gain higher market share, organisations are customising their products, and progressing from mass marketing to personalised marketing. The trend is almost universal - be it a product or service. This strategy has paid off well, and it shall revolutionise the HR function, if the principles of customisation learned from marketing are applied to people practices. Employees - the ultimate customer of HR offerings, are expecting the same from their organisations (Rousseau, 2001). Cardy et al., 2007 have translated the customer equity framework (a construct from the marketing domain) into the HRM domain, and labelled it as employee

equity and this has shifted the direction of HRM towards workers as customers in an organisation. The existing literature also supports ‘consumerism’, and support that such organisations achieve higher employee engagement and retention, higher productivity, to eventually lead to better financial performance (Bremen et al., 2013). Akin to customers, today’s workforce is not only more aware, but also has access to myriad employment opportunities, and this strengthens the notion that HR experts think and act as marketers do.

### **Knowledge Workers**

Knowledge workers have attributes that are different from other workers vis-a-vis their autonomy, motivations and attitudes. Warren Bennis, world’s leading expert on leadership, commented that knowledge workers bear a peculiar resemblance to cats, which as we know can’t be herded. These different attributes of knowledge workers surely imply that they can’t be ‘managed’ in the strict sense of the term and need a different set of HR practices to get the best out of them in terms of productivity, which are not only different but an upgrade of traditional HR practices.

### **Transition from an Economic Perspective to Social Exchange Perspective**

Traditionally employment was viewed as an economic exchange (Vroom, 1964). However, over the last five decades, after the publication of seminal study by Huselid in 1995, followed by many others trying to establish relationship between HR practices and performance, the employee-employer relationship has transformed from an economic exchange into a social exchange relationship which is based on the idea of reciprocal exchange (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Blau (1964), came up with the ‘The social exchange theory’, which suggests that when employees perceive that their organisation is committed to their well-being through a well-designed HR system, they are more likely to reciprocate it with behaviours and attitudes beneficial for the organisation. Though the social exchange theory is built on the principle of mutual exchange, but the exact nature of return from the employee is dependent on his/her discretion (Berkery et al., 2020). HR practices having an orientation towards employees create a mutually beneficial environment whereby if an organization offers something that employees value, the employee will reciprocate by

offering something that the organization values (Latorre et al., 2016). This brings us to the need of developing distinguished HRM practices which increase employees' discretionary effort and in line with the concept of social exchange, employees reciprocate by behaviours which are beyond the call of duty (Organ & Ryan, 1995).

### **Generation Z - The Latest Entrant into the Workforce**

Generation Z, as they are popularly called, are individuals who are born 1997 onward (Dimock, 2019). Organisations can no longer afford to ignore them, treating them as kids, because the oldest in this generation has now crossed 25 and is the latest entrant into the workforce. With each passing year their proportion in the workforce shall increase, as they replace the retiring Baby Boomers and Generation X, thereby adding another reason for employee diversity (already discussed). Each generation has their own set of personal experiences in their growing years which mould their specific behaviours to eventually influence their work style (Gaidhani et al., 2019). This generation is not only more technology sophisticated, but is more globally connected, flexible, open-minded, creative and is far more entrepreneurial than their previous generations (Schawbel, 2014). They enter the organisation with their baggage of expectations w.r.t work and workplace. Organisations seeking to tap their full potential shall have to cater to their entrepreneurial ambitions, offer cross-functional projects, and align their work with their strengths. Factors like Health-care coverage and wellness programs in the form of Gym and recreational facilities top their list of expectations, which were hitherto not considered seriously by organisations (Schawbel, 2014). The future belongs to this generation and therefore there is a need to redesign HR practices keeping them centre stage.

### **Critical Appraisal of HPWS**

The seminal study by Huselid in 1995 was followed by a series of studies, skewed in favour of adoption of High Performance Work Practices (HPWP). Though the rhetoric of HPWS was essentially meant to be a win-win proposition, but the reality speaks otherwise. The term 'high performance' in HPWS is itself indicative of its unilateral focus on performance, rendering the win-win claim fairly hollow. This is also apparent from the fact that as compared to the overwhelming attention given by researchers on organisational performance (Huselid, 1995;

Combs et al., 2006; Arthur, 1994; MacDuffie, 1995; Datta, Guthrie & Wright, 2005; Subramony, 2009), there are much lesser number of studies trying to identify their impact on employees. This itself raises doubts on whose interests are better taken care of by the introduction of innovative practices (Boxall, 2012). A rigorous critical examination of the extravagant claims of HPWS, supported by empirical evidence for the same, bring out that HPWS has failed to keep its promise.

The critiques have alleged passive employee exploitation in the name of autonomy, higher participation, self-managed teams, job security and so on. The concept of synergy is at the very heart of HPWS, arguing that HPWPs are mutually reinforcing and should, therefore, be used in a coordinated manner to obtain the best outcomes. This additive effect of HPWPs is confirmed in the studies by Kochan and Osterman (1994), Levine (1995), and Appelbaum et al. (2000), wherein they claim of increasing returns from adding innovative practices. Critics however argue that with continuous increase in the intensity of innovative practices, employees are under constant pressure to perform more and better, and this increases the risk of emotional exhaustion (Bakker et al., 2004; Kroon et al., 2009). Ramsay et al. (2000) also share similar apprehensions that higher number of HPWPs lead to work intensification.

The concept of job autonomy has been elementary to the argument given by Appelbaum et al. (2000) in their seminal work but has faced serious criticism as critics argue that it leads to intensification of work in the name of job autonomy (Ramsay et al., 2000). Moreover, the autonomy is most of the times, just symbolic, as employers relinquish control only to the extent it is necessary to positively influence employee's behavior, without actually increasing their sense of empowerment (Ramsay et al., 2000; Kalmi & Kauhanen, 2008).

Self-managed teams, another highlight of the HPWS, is also subject to a mixed response. The biggest criticism against teamwork came from Barker (1993). His analysis concluded that by being a part of the self-managed teams, workers are putting themselves under control of their peer group, without even realizing that they are still under increased surveillance. Teamwork is in a way, replacement of the traditional mode of supervisors' supervision with peer control, which is more powerful, though less visible. Danford et al. (2004), commented that there was a wide gap between the rhetoric of participation and the reality on the factory floor. Workers feel that though their suggestions are applauded, they are not normally implemented and gradually disappear, in what they label as a 'black hole', to be never considered. HPWS also claim

to increase employee income and enhance job security. The most candid evidence was given by Osterman (2000), wherein he discovered that companies who had a HPWS in place in 1992 were more likely than their counterparts to have layoffs in 1995-97. Danford et al. (2004), also claim downsizing to be inherent in HPWS implementation. The innovative practices are perceived to be just another buzz word, which might appear to be favouring employees, but the reality is much harsher.

### **Imperfections Inherent in Idiosyncratic Deals (i-Deals)**

Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) were thought of as a possible answer to the ever increasing demand towards individualisation. Though the literature is loaded with studies trying to establish promising correlation between i-deals and positive employee outcomes, but looking beyond the brighter side, might reveal some inherent limitations in the process. The very process through which i-deals are granted, is at times, host to a sequence of imperfections, which not only undermine its potential benefits but also prevent its free flow to all employees. This calls for an intensive analysis involving the three principal stakeholders of the i-deals - employees who receive the i-deal, managers with whom the i-deal is negotiated, and the co-workers of these employees and managers (Greenberg et al., 2004).

An i-deal is negotiated predominantly on an employee's request, and this characteristic feature, limits its free flow to the entire organisation. Employees who are good at taking initiative and have the added advantage of political and social astuteness are more likely to have i-deals (Rousseau et al., 2016). There might be some employees who are not comfortable asking for deals, while others may be reluctant to initiate, believing that their request shall not be considered. Some employees may lack the requisite self-confidence owing to their own personality characteristics or their low LMX relationships. This in no way means that they are not deserving and flexibility deals should not be extended to them. The LMX (Leader-Member exchange) that an employee maintains, influences the superior's decision. There is empirical evidence to show a positive relationship between i-deals request and receipt and high levels of LMX relationships as compared to lower levels of LMX (Morf et al., 2019; Ho & Tekleab, 2016). Superiors, are also social beings, and may be more supportive of employees with whom they have high quality relationships

and are therefore more likely to accept their i-deal requests (Ho & Tekleab, 2016). Any denial of i-deal may be frustrating (Kroon et al., 2015), and employees are likely to attribute it as an unjustified act by the organisation, rather than acknowledging their personal limitations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Denial of an i-deal may also widen the gap between what the employees desire from his job and what they are offered, and this may offset the potential benefits proposed by empirical studies. Last but not the least, howsoever fair and ideal an i-deal may be, co-workers can suspect some foul play and this shall have an impact on their attitude and behaviour. A co-worker may feel disadvantaged, display malicious envy and may, therefore, react counterproductively which may offset the i-deal benefit (Marescaux et al., 2019). After assessing the merit of i-deals on the basis of the process and parties involved, it's time to find alternative approaches which are equally promising and are equipped to handle issues much more responsibly.

## CONCLUSION

Organisations have come a long way in understanding their employees and the dynamic nature of employment relationships. Having endorsed the supremacy of the 'human element' there has been a significant increase in scholarly and managerial attention towards HR practices which can best leverage this potential asset. But sadly, the ever-increasing diversity of the workforce, coupled with the failure of HPWS to stand to its tall claims and the narrow reach of i-deals, all call for a paradigm shift from standardised HR practices to practices which are more individualised or customised. Contemporary times necessitate treating employees as '*individuals*' and providing them with work and work environment that fits in their unique needs, skills and aspirations. It's time for organisation to think and rethink from the employee's perspective and align their jobs and work environment to match their needs and expectations. Thus, it's time that organisations enter into a new contract with their employees which says, "*We'll make your job (and life) more meaningful. You give us your hearts and minds*" (Helen Murlis & Peggy Schubert, 2002).

Building upon existing literature, the paper simply attempts to present a credible rationale for considering flexibility while designing HR practices, rather than providing solutions and/or suggestions of HR practices per se.

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