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Toward a non-organizational theory of HRM? A complex adaptive systems perspective on the HRM ecosystem in (con)temporary organizing

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Synopsis

The emergence of the temporary organization has ushered in a new logic of organizing accompanied by paradigm-shifting challenges with respect to how the evolving nature of work, workers, and collective effort are to be understood. Engaging in problematization and curating insights from complexity science, we develop a multi-level framework capturing the contemporary human resource management ecosystem that integrates key structural (open boundaries and relational constitution), emergent (contextual and complex causality), and temporal (dynamic and adaptive) properties. To deepen lines of inquiry around these defining elements, we advance a series of propositions for testing, and we outline a range of theoretical, methodological, and practical implications that arise from our work.

Introduction and Background

Temporary forms of organizing are on the rise reflecting a widespread increase in atomism, fluidity, flexibility, speed, and dynamism in the complex landscape of contemporary business (Mortensen & Haas, 2018; Shreyögg & Sydow, 2010). Despite this, HRM scholarship on the temporary organization (TO), and the inherent complexity that accompanies it, remains underdeveloped (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Huemann, 2015). Addressing this lacuna is important in order to avoid a situation where dramatic changes unfolding in contemporary organizing and economic life outpace our theories and our methods for representing and explaining them (Child, 2005). It is with this in mind that in this contribution we engage in problematization (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013) to develop provoking theory (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2020). Provoking theory suggests

not only “that things [phenomena] could be otherwise than they are, but that things are already otherwise than the ways in which they are represented” (Linstead, 2016, p. 171). Foregrounding the dynamic, embedded, and contextualized nature of temporary organizing in highlighting the need to understand and embrace the nature of the broader HR ecosystem (Snell & Morris, 2021), we highlight that HRM, both as an academic discipline and as a professional practice, must remain relevant to, and in tune with, the demands of this complex, dynamic and evolving context.

Conceptual Framework

Combining insights from ecosystems thinking and what some have termed the “complexity turn” (Urry, 2005) in organization and management theory, we propose a multi-level three-dimensional framework for theorizing the contemporary HRM ecosystem. We define this more contemporary HRM ecosystem as: *‘A self-organized, adaptive, dynamic and open constellation of interdependent and distributed HRM and non HRM actors, from within and beyond the organization, operating at multiple, aggregated levels, whose linear*

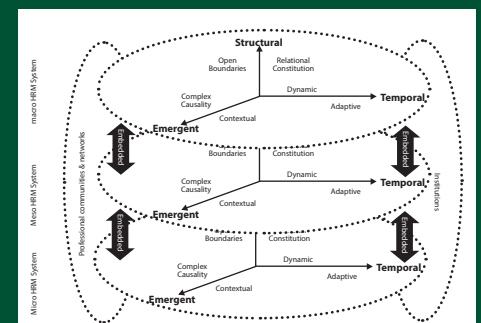


Figure 1: A multi-level three dimensional framework for theorizing the contemporary HRM ecosystem

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and non-linear interactions result in patterns of HRM activities through which both individual and collective goals are pursued”.

We offer a conceptualization of the HRM ecosystem across three dimensions underpinned by six principles as follows; *structural* (boundaries and relational constitution), *emergent* (contextual and complex causality), and *temporal* (dynamic and adaptive), all key systemic properties that do not reside in individual elements but account for the defining properties of system behavior. Our model also reflects the fact that HRM is inherently multilevel because it consists of nested components encompassing philosophies, policies, and practices, each of which can be displayed at different organizational levels (Ostroff & Bowen, 2000). We contend that beneath mainstream HRM theories and research methods lies what Abbott (2001) calls “a general linear reality”, or causal beliefs that essentially treat linear models as representations of the actual social world. Furthermore, our research models, despite using dynamic language, are often conveniently static (Snell & Morris, 2021). The overall research posture we advocate is co-evolutionary, multi-level, contextual, processual, and emergent. In order to give expression to this research posture and serve as a conduit to exploring our framework, we advance four key propositions as follows:

Proposition 1: HRM scope is extended to envisage resource flow, resource orchestration

and accessible capabilities at the ecosystem level and across all system actors;

Proposition 2: HRM influence is envisaged to focus on ensuring ecosystem strength by shaping the collaborative and relational dynamics contained within the system, rather than the transactional focus of the resource-based view;

Proposition 3: HRM value is re-conceptualized to facilitate engagement from shifting and dynamic constellations of economic and non-economic stakeholders in order to co-create and shape policies and practices appropriate to context; and

Proposition 4: HRM strategies and practices are continuously enacted and adapted in the implementation process via dynamic and adaptive properties in response to contextual contingencies.

Managerial Implications

Our overall theorizing effort and related propositions hold several managerial implications. These encompass structural aspects referring to our very understanding of the nature of work and who comprises the workforce, through to how this work is governed and gets done, along with the HR core competences required to coordinate and deliver this effort. We synthesize these implications as they relate to key building blocks of our framework in the accompanying table below.

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Forthcoming Research Bulletin

Title: What’s age got to do with it? A primer and review of the workplace aging literature.

Authors:

Beier, M., Kanfer, R., Kooij, TAM, & Truxillo, D. M

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Table: Synthesis of Managerial Implications

STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS: OPEN BOUNDARIES AND RELATIONAL CONSTITUTION	TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS: ADAPTIVE AND DYNAMIC	EMERGENT DIMENSIONS: COMPLEX CAUSALITY AND CONTEXT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A broader definition of the workforce including all talent models for all work requirements (internal/external and employee/non-employee). HR then identify the skills and knowledge needed, locate and activate effective collaborations and specify how they will be operationalized. Consistency issues would need to be addressed across the different cohorts of the (now broader) workforce. - Multiple “forms” of work co-exist as do multiple “cultures”. HR works more closely and shares a cross-functional approach to governance with other stakeholders – e.g. finance, legal, procurement. HR actors act as boundary spanners with responsibility for bridging, integrating and shaping collaboration between disciplines, functions and actors. - A more appropriate technology architecture may be required to enable effective analytics/evaluation across the broader ecosystem, including the ability to identify timely skills gaps. - The management of relational bases within and across the ecosystem means building social capital at structural, relational and cognitive levels. - HR co-creation empowers HR actors to become critical to value co-creation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HR actors encourage agile and adaptive behaviours – e.g. spontaneous collaboration with others, improvising solutions to remove unanticipated obstacles. - As system designers, HR devise and revise the bare minimum of guiding principles that need to promote freedom and flexibility on the one hand, and sufficient order and discipline on the other. - Governance and control are only undertaken to the extent of providing aforementioned common guidelines. - Resource flow and resource orchestration becomes much more dynamic and complex when tackled to consider TO churn and move this to an ecosystem level. - HR actors would benefit from engagement with specific futures thinking and temporal skills drawing from the anticipatory competence highlighted in sustainability education. This includes concepts of time such as phase (past, present, future), terms (short, long), continuity (dynamics/paths), non-linearity. It also includes concepts of uncertainty and epistemic state (including possibility, probability and desirability of future development). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Core talent processes and HR practices need to evolve to be specifically designed to match contextual requirements. - HR actors understand that outcomes are unpredictable and that emergent structure involves multiple futures, with no place for rigid planning in favour of implementing more adaptive practices. “Plan, then execute” mindset is to then displaced. - Feedback, iterative learning and collaborative processes of engagement are all key. To that end, HR need to constantly engage with stakeholders re their unique needs and how they relate to each HR practice. - HR actors would benefit from developing competence in systems thinking and related concepts and to consider more specifically in their enactment of HR strategies and practices properties of systems dynamics such as those outlined here.