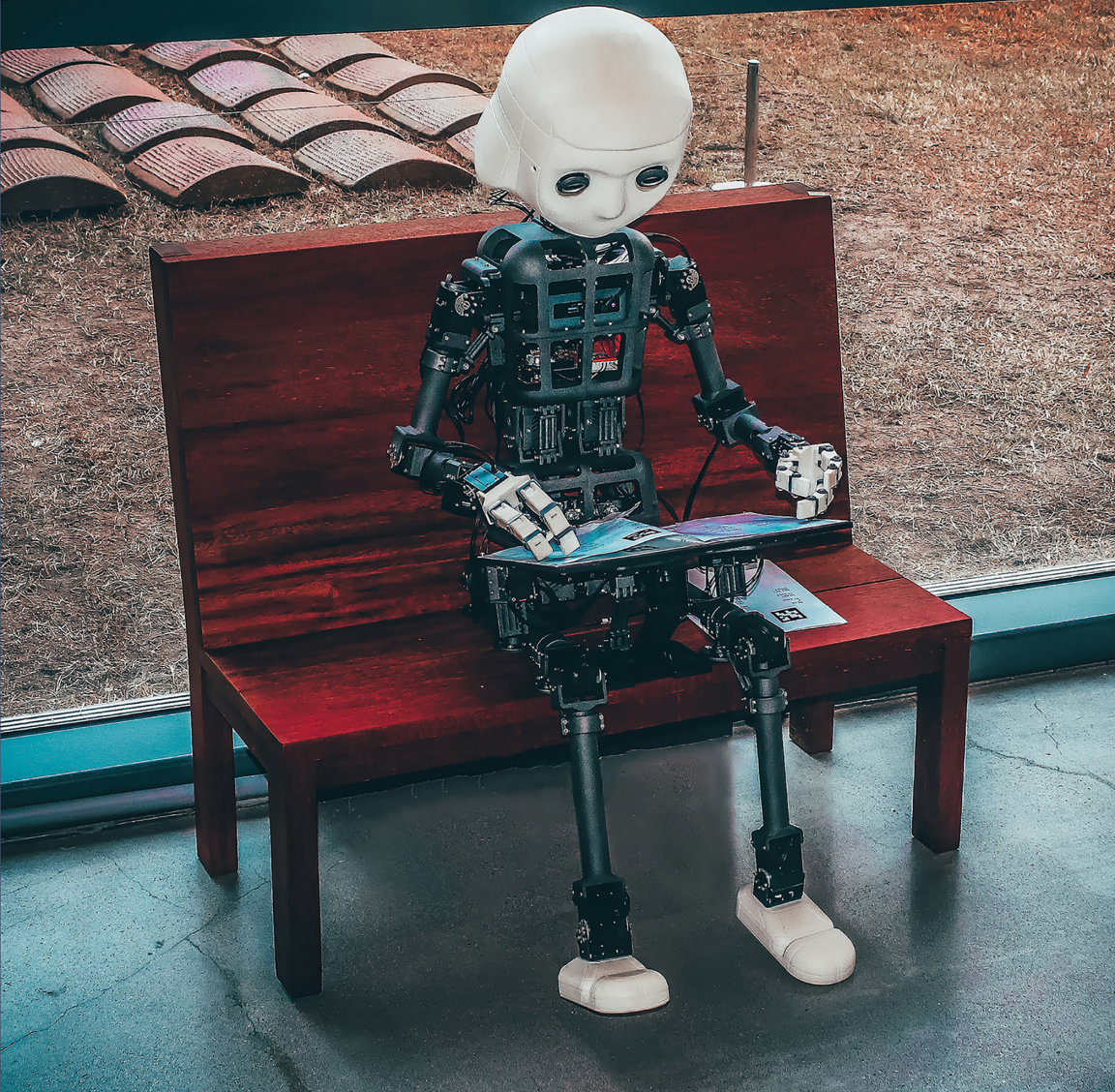


A Volume in
Research in Human Resource Management

The Future of Human Resource Management



Edited by
Brian Murray | James H. Dulebohn | Dianna L. Stone
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The Future of Human Resource Management

A Volume in Research in Human Resource Management

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CHAPTER 1

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AMBIDEXTERITY

Managing for the Present and Positioning for the Future

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ABSTRACT

Human resource (HR) professionals are being challenged by competing demands. On the one hand, they are facing enhanced pressures to perform in the traditional HR functions. Recruiting and staffing organizations is

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challenging in a tight labor market in which applicants are quick to change jobs and are seeking employment rewards beyond the traditional focus on pay levels. Unions are experiencing a renaissance in industries as diverse as airlines, auto manufacturing, screen acting and writing, and coffee shop retailing. Workers are demanding job arrangements that include work-from-home provisions and are rejecting companies' plans for hybrid return-to-office schemes. On the other hand, HR professionals are facing unprecedented issues arising from artificial intelligence, big data and analytics, and the rise of a gig economy workforce. The juxtaposition of the traditional and emerging issues in HR signals the need for professionals to be responsive to both managing efficiently and aligning with organizational needs in the present as well as positioning their own and their workforce's ability to adapt to environmental changes in the future. In this chapter, we introduce this volume's chapters on the future of HR and establish an HR ambidexterity perspective to identify the present and future research questions motivated by the authors' chapters.

The human resource management (HRM) profession is facing an unprecedented challenge. Historically, the focus of HRM has been the design and delivery of systems to efficiently and effectively staff organizations, to develop the human capital and the capacity of employees to perform, to compensate in ways that are motivating, equitable, and responsive to their needs, and to foster safety, security, voice, and advancement for employees individually and collectively. In the contemporary business environment, HRM professionals continue to be challenged to deliver on these activities; however, they simultaneously stand at a juncture for which the future of "human" in HRM is as uncertain as the HR professional's role in managing a workforce that is not focused on employees.

It is an exciting time to be an HRM professional. The need for creativity, innovation, and flexibility in HRM planning and design has never been greater. Pay level, the long-standing cornerstone of employee attraction and retention, is being challenged by other conditions of employment such as work location and accommodations for distance or virtual employment, work design flexibility and personalization of the terms or conditions of employment, and work climates that support both psychological and physical well-being (Crowley, 2022; Jain, 2023). The most basic of employee staffing functions, screening potential candidates applying for positions, can now be done by artificial intelligence (AI), which can filter and prioritize applicants' resumes and conduct initial screening interviews, but which also are susceptible to manipulation and discrimination due to their underlying programming (Kim & Bodie, 2021). Both training and performance monitoring, likewise, are being transformed by technology with digital delivery affecting the scope and modality of the former (Maity, 2019) and constant tracking, analytics, and instantaneous feedback changing the

impact of the latter (Ascott, 2022; Bales & Stone, 2020). Intensifying the demands on HRM professionals has been the move to team-based work in organizations, which can expand or change the focus of each component of the team member's employment experience (Benishek & Lazzara, 2019; Murray et al., 2022; Strauss & Grand, 2022).

Conversely, it is a time characterized by uncertainty for the HRM profession. Whereas work and the worker have been the purview of HR professionals, there has been a paradigmatic shift in the definition of the "worker" and how work is completed that has placed the operations manager and the technology professional in the driver's seat. Traditionally, one would consider the tradeoff of investment in capital versus labor for the completion of work; now that tradeoff is a more complex continuum, including employment labor, independent and dependent contract labor, artificial intelligence (AI) in lieu of labor, and technology or physical capital (e.g., Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Other than its traditional role in managing the employment relationship for a decreasing employment base and its supporting systems, it is unclear what HRM's future is for a contract gig workforce or an AI "workforce." Without a proactive posture among HR professionals that establishes a role across the whole of the labor-capital continuum, HRM may experience diminished relevance despite decades of striving for strategic influence.

HRM is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, HR professionals have a fundamental role for attracting and engaging the organization's employees, while on the other, they have the opportunity to leverage decades of accumulated knowledge about the management of employees that they can use to inform non-employee worker management (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017) and the design of artificial intelligence substituting for human labor. To the extent that they invest in the latter, they may fear surrendering a central role in the strategy of the organization to operations and technology professionals who define what is work and who is the worker. To maintain a strategic role, HR professionals must understand their importance to the organization's functioning, the distinctiveness of their professional contributions, and a broader and more adaptable definition of "human" in human resource management that goes beyond the employee.

The duality of the employee and non-employee or AI workforces challenges the ambidexterity of HRM. That is, HR professionals must function effectively in their present mainstay of managing employees and the systems that support employment while anticipating a new workforce and definition of work to which HRM must adapt and reposition itself and what it considers its core functions and contribution to the organization. Organizational researchers historically have defined this tradeoff or balance of thriving in the present while positioning for the future as organizational

ambidexterity and examined its effect on an organization's ability to adapt effectively in dynamic product or service environments (e.g., [Duncan, 1976](#); [Kassotaki, 2022](#); [O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013](#)). In this chapter and as a perspective for introducing this volume of *Research in Human Resource Management*, we challenge HRM professionals and researchers to consider what form of ambidexterity is needed to both effectively steward the employment relationship and be positioned to shepherd an evolving and redefined workforce relationship. Further, we ask what the implications of that form are for the future of the HR profession and how it is studied.

To explore these questions, we present a background and definition for HRM ambidexterity, develop complementary propositions for managing the duality of HRM for four dimensions of HR research, and discuss the implications for HR research and practice. Throughout the presentation, we review and incorporate perspectives offered by the authors of this volume's chapters.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AMBIDEXTERITY

Ambidexterity is the concurrent attention to efficiently managing (exploiting) current demands and proactively anticipating and positioning (exploring) for future demands ([Duncan, 1976](#); [March, 1991](#)). As an organizational phenomenon, its origin is commonly credited to [Duncan \(1976\)](#). He identified a phenomenon of organizations trying both to perform well according to the demands of their current market and to innovate and perform in the context of a future marketplace. Researchers have built a substantial body of knowledge that both defines what it means to be ambidextrous and what the advantages of ambidexterity are ([Junni et al., 2013](#); [Kassotaki, 2022](#); [Mathias, 2014](#)). [O'Reilly and Tushman \(2013\)](#) identified several important organizational outcomes of ambidexterity in their literature review, including sales growth, objective and subjective ratings, innovation, and firm survival.

Organizational ambidexterity is commonly recognized in three forms: sequential, structural, and contextual ([O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013](#)). Sequential ambidexterity refers to an organization's ability to evolve through periods of shifts or changes in environmental demands to align structure with strategy ([Duncan, 1976](#)). An example of sequential ambidexterity can be seen in the evolution of Netflix from a mail-subscription DVD service to a streaming video service offering a library of licensed content to a streaming video service offering significant original content offerings accompanied by a less extensive library of licensed content. Netflix anticipated the move to fully online product delivery and the subsequent entry of content owners that provide proprietary content through their own platform.

Simultaneous or structural ambidexterity refers to distinct business units that are primarily focused on either the efficient exploitation of existing products, services, and technologies or development and innovation in new and emerging technologies, markets, products, or services that anticipate future environmental conditions or demands. An example of structural ambidexterity can be seen in the organizational structure of Merck & Co, which simultaneously maintains major business units focused on established products and mature markets in tandem with others focused on new product research and developing markets (Van Arnum, 2009; see also Merck, n.d.).

Contextual ambidexterity refers to “the behavioral capacity to simultaneously demonstrate alignment and adaptability across an entire business unit” (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004, p. 209). It is accomplished at the individual level by motivating and enabling each person to choose when and how to focus on aligning with present demands versus improving adaptability for changes in the environment. In their review of organizational ambidexterity, O’Reilly and Tushman, (2013) concluded that regardless of the form of ambidexterity, its increased presence is related to the organization’s performance, and as such, attention to fostering and managing ambidexterity is warranted.

Though there has been significant attention given to the forms and importance of ambidexterity, researchers have afforded only limited attention to the HR function that selects, develops, and motivates the individuals who enable it. In general, they have examined HRM as a system of practices that pursues a particular type of HR architecture or fosters a level of flexibility (e.g., Garaus et al., 2016; Hansen et al., 2019; Pak et al., 2023). In rare cases, researchers and practitioners have looked inward on the HR function to examine its own forms of ambidexterity (e.g., Huang & Kim, 2013). In no cases were we able to identify where HR researchers explored how their own work was structured to understand or foster ambidexterity in the profession.

HRM’s Contribution to Organizational Ambidexterity

Researchers have associated human resource practices with organizational ambidexterity to demonstrate that HR can play an important role in an organization’s ability to be ambidextrous and to exploit that capacity. These studies have focused on high performance work systems (HPWS), human resource architecture (HRA), and human resource flexibility (HRF) as means to fostering employee capabilities to engage in both exploitative and explorational aspects of organizational ambidexterity.

High Performance Work Systems

A high-performance work system is “a system of horizontally and vertically aligned employment practices designed to affect both the ability and motivation of employees” (Patel et al., 2013, p. 1421). The practices are often referred to as HR bundles (MacDuffie, 1995). Bundles that motivate desirable employee behaviors or abilities are expected to improve employee performance and indirectly influence organizational outcomes (Boxall, 2012; Huselid, 1995; Patel et al., 2013). Patel and colleagues (Patel et al., 2013) tested a model of HPWS’s influence on organizational ambidexterity and found evidence in their data to show a relationship between HPWS and organizational ambidexterity and that the relationship mediated the link between HPWS utilization and a measure of firm growth.

Garaus et al. (2016) further developed the understanding that HPWS can positively impact organizational performance through enhanced workforce flexibility and ambidexterity by defining the characteristics of the bundle of ambidextrous HR practices that foster exploration and exploitation through integrative employment and work practices that support collaboration, common reference frame, and knowledge integration among employees. They further concluded from their qualitative, multi-case study that the effective set of HR practices was the same for employees engaged in both exploitation and exploration functions and should not be differentiated among units in organizations that practice structural ambidexterity.

Human Resource Architecture

Human resource architecture refers to the set of employment modes, employment relationships, and HR configurations engaged by an organization and the differences in modes, relationships, and configurations across groups within the organization (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Lepak and Snell (1999) proposed that the architecture would vary based on the value and uniqueness of the human capital comprised by the groups. Luo et al. (2021) conducted a review of studies built on Lepak and Snell’s framework and concluded that there is substantial support for it, though several research gaps remain. They found specific evidence supporting an effect of human capital characteristics on HRM practices, a lack of studies validating a direct relationship from human capital and HRM congruence to organizational performance, and some evidence connecting HR architecture to HR flexibility, which was proposed as an indirect path to firm performance.

Building on Lepak and Snell (1999), Hansen and colleagues (Hansen et al., 2019) developed a model of HRM architecture to support organizational ambidexterity by identifying an appropriate balance between

exploitative and exploratory learning in different business environments. They presented their model in matrix representations that included two dimensions representing environmental conditions. The dimensions were “need for innovation” and “need for flexibility,” which were both presented in a low-high two-by-two structure. In each matrix, they assigned exploitative design to the condition of low needs for both flexibility and innovation and exploratory design to the conditions of high needs for both flexibility and innovation. In their first representation, they also presented contextual ambidextrous design associated with high need for flexibility (i.e., high adaptability) and low need for innovation (i.e., incremental innovation). They positioned structural ambidextrous design in the condition of low need for flexibility (i.e., alignment focused) and high need for innovation (i.e., radical innovation).

As a second representation, Hansen and colleagues overlaid Lepak and Snell’s (1999) HR systems and configurations from their four quadrants of HRA. They equated the access of strategic value for HR configuration with the need for flexibility axis, and the uniqueness for HR configuration with the need for innovation axis. Within the quadrants, they associated a compliance-based HR system with low strategic value (low need for flexibility) and low uniqueness (low need for innovation), which is associated with contractual work arrangements for human capital. Conversely, they positioned a commitment-based HR system with high strategic value (high need for flexibility/adaptability) and high uniqueness (high need for innovation/radical innovation), which is associated with knowledge-based employment. Where they previously positioned contextual ambidexterity design, they placed productivity-based HR systems to support high strategic value (high need for flexibility/adaptability) and low uniqueness (low need for flexibility), which is associated with job-based employment. In the opposite quadrant, where they previously position structural ambidexterity design, they placed collaborative-based HR systems to support high uniqueness (high need for innovation/radical innovation) and low strategic value (low need for flexibility), which is associated with alliances or partnership human capital arrangements.

Human Resource Flexibility

Wright and Snell (1998) introduced a model of fit and flexibility that tied an organization’s strategic choices to its performance through a series of fits and a HRF path that included flexibility-focused practices and employee skills and behaviors. Building on Sanchez’s (1995) classification of flexibility according to resource and coordination flexibility and Milliman et al.’s (1991) conceptualization of HRF that incorporated adaptation to

demands from either the environment or the organization, they defined HRF as “the extent to which the firm’s human resources possess skills and behavioral repertoires that can give a firm options for pursuing strategic alternatives in the firm’s competitive environment, as well as the extent to which the necessary HRM practices can be identified, developed, and implemented quickly to maximize the flexibilities inherent in those human resources” (p. 761). They summarized the relationship between their HRF elements (i.e., practices, skills, behaviors) and Sanchez’s classification by offering “strategic HRM indicators” that included: (a) the applicability of practices across a range of jobs or other contexts, rigidity of application, the malleability of practices, and the speed of feedback, (b) skill breadth, ability to acquire skills, and variety of skills in the workforce and acquired from contingent workers, and (c) rigidity of programmed or routinized employee behaviors and the complementarity of different employee groups’ behaviors (p. 767, see Table 1).

Ketkar and Sett (2009) validated hypotheses derived from Wright and Snell (1998) and extended their model of HRF by introducing an additional form of flexibility, flexibility inducing HR practices (FHRP), which are HR activities, such as staffing, training, performance management, and other common HR functions that promote adaptable skills and behaviors of employees. They demonstrated that for their data, practice flexibility and FHRP were related to one another and were mediated by their relationships to skills and behavioral flexibility sequentially to employee, operational, and financial performance. Their extension of Wright and Snell’s model is important because it more explicitly recognized that the set of HR decisions in addition to the flexibility of HR practices can impact individual and organizational adaptability and performance.

Drawing on the work of Wright and Snell (1998), Úbeda-García et al. (2018) developed a model and presented evidence that HRF mediates the relationship between HPWS and organizational ambidexterity. They further showed that ambidexterity fully mediated between HPWS and HRF in improving organizational performance in their data. Their work offered important implications because it reinforced the objective of HPWS to improve workforce flexibility, and it supported ambidexterity as the mechanism by which HPWS impacts organizational performance. Their work was distinctive by its global measures of performance as comparative performance to competitors and of ambidexterity inclusive of both exploitative and exploratory organizational behaviors.

Taken together, studies of HPWS, HRA, and HRF provide evidence of the importance of HR decisions and specific bundles of practices for supporting organizational ambidexterity by fostering the exploitation, exploration, and adaptability capacities of the organization’s workforce or balancing employees’ attention to them. Although it has been important