

The Impact of Strategic Human Resource Management Practices on Productivity: The Case of the Malaysian Oil Palm Industry

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ABSTRACT

A substantial body of evidence in management theory and business practice has accumulated to show that Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is associated with improved organizational performance. In spite of this evidence, empirical studies have shown that some organizations are slow in implementing those practices. One of the fundamental reasons behind this is the fact that as a body of practical knowledge, SHRM has seemingly lacked any theoretical research framework to underpin it. Thus, this paper is an attempt to address this problem by (1) contributing to theory building in strategic HRM, and (2) empirically testing the hypothesis that SHRM practices affect productivity. This study used a sample of 129 managers of oil palm estates from a national survey of estate managers reflecting the 1998 financial year. Using linear regression techniques, the results suggest that (1) estates implement less strategic HR practices than anticipated, and (2) some strategic HR practices were related to productivity. Managerial implications of the study were discussed.

ABSTRAK

Bukti yang banyak dalam teori pengurusan dan amalan perniagaan telah menunjukkan bahawa Pengurusan Sumber Manusia Strategik (SHRM) ada kaitannya dengan peningkatan prestasi organisasi. Bagaimanapun, kajian empirik menunjukkan bahawa sesetengah organisasi agak lembab dalam melaksanakan amalan-amalan ini. Salah satu sebab utama bagi menerangkan keadaan ini adalah kerana ketiadaan satu kerangka teori yang menjadi pendasar kepada ilmu amalan SHRM. Justeru, kertas ini adalah usaha menyelesaikan masalah ini dengan (1) menyumbang ke arah pembangunan teori dalam Pengurusan sumber manusia strategik, dan (2) menguji secara empirik hipotesis bahawa amalan SHRM mempunyai kesan ke atas produktiviti. Kajian ini menggunakan sampel seramai 129 pengurus estet kelapa sawit, daripada suatu tinjauan kebangsaan pengurus estet yang mencerminkan tahun kewangan 1998. Dengan menggunakan teknik analisis regresi linear, kesudahannya menunjukkan bahawa (1) pelaksanaan amalan HR strategik di estet adalah kurang daripada yang dijangkakan, dan (2) amalan HR strategic tertentu berkaitan dengan produktiviti. Implikasi dapatan kajian kepada pengurus juga dibincang.

INTRODUCTION

Research in management theory and business practices show that effective Human Resource Management (HRM) is associated with the achievement of an organization's business objectives (Jackson & Schuler, 1995; Schuler 1989) such as high productivity and corporate financial performance (Huselid, 1995). In this new millennium, more than ever before, this field of research is being called upon to give its best because the new millennium is predicted to be led by technology and the role of human resource in such an endeavor remains central. This applies to developed countries of Europe, Japan, United States and Canada, in fast growing economies like Malaysia or in emerging markets in Africa like Nigeria and Ghana. In spite of this evidence, some organizations are slow in implementing those practices found to contribute to organizational success (Saari et al., 1988; Jackson & Schuler, 1995). This is the situation in some estates in the oil palm plantation sector in Malaysia. Part of the reason is that as a practical body of knowledge, HRM has been largely atheoretical (Ulrich, 1996). Thus, the purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to establish a theoretical lens for interpreting Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), and (2) to illustrate the relevance of theoretical perspectives by empirically investigating the impact of strategic HR practices on productivity in the oil palm plantation estates.

STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: THE TRIPARTITE APPROACH

The concept of strategic human resource management (SHRM) is firmly entrenched in the literature. However, the field has not become as pivotal as it should be. One of the major criticisms against it was that it has been largely atheoretical. Recent theorizing has begun to provide greater clarity. However, much work remains to be done. Perhaps the most comprehensive attempt to

provide methods of theorizing come from Delery and Doty (1996). They consolidated the prevalent modes of theorizing within an empirically tested tripartite model: universalistic, contingency and configurational perspectives (Dunkey, 1997).

Researchers employing the *universalistic model*, like many micro-level HR researchers, posit that some HR practices (individually and as systems) always improve performance regardless of the strategic goals of the firm. Universalistic arguments are the simplest form of theoretical statements in the SHRM literature because they imply that the relationship between a given independent variable and a dependent variable is universal across the population of firms. To develop universalistic arguments, first, important strategic HR practices must be identified. Second, arguments that relate individual practices to organizational performance must be presented (Delery & Doty, 1996).

The *contingency model* goes beyond direct HR-performance relationships because it argues that the impact of HR practices on firm performance may be further enhanced when practices are matched with the competitive requirements inherent in a firm's strategic posture (Youndt et al., 1996). Accordingly, contingency arguments are more complex than universalistic arguments because contingency arguments imply interactions rather than the simple linear relationship incorporated in universalistic theories. In other words, contingency theorists posit that the relationship between the relevant independent variable and the dependent variable will be different for different levels of the critical contingency variable. The organization's strategy is considered to be the primary contingency factor in SHRM literature. Thus, a contingency perspective requires a researcher to select a theory of firm strategy and then specify how individual HR practices will interact with firm strategy to result in organizational performance. Several studies (such as Delery & Doty, 1996) utilized Miles and Snow's (1978) theory of strategy, structure and process because it has been shown to be a relatively powerful predictor of organizational effectiveness.

Configurational models differ from universalistic and traditional contingency theories because configurational models are guided by the holistic principle of inquiry and are usually based on typologies of ideal types. In general, configurational theories are concerned with how the pattern of multiple independent variables is related to a dependent variable rather than with how individual independent variables are related to the dependent variable. Wright and McMahan (1992:298) appeared to suggest a configurational perspective when they argued that SHRM is concerned with “the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals” and that, in order to be effective, an organization must develop an HR system that achieves both horizontal and vertical fit. Horizontal fit refers to the internal consistency of the organization’s HR policies or practices, and vertical fit refers to the congruence of the HR system with other organizational characteristics, such as firm strategy. An ideal configuration would be one with the highest degree of horizontal fit.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Many researchers have supported universalistic predictions. Huselid, et al. (1997) cited studies showing that earlier focus of strategic HR practices have concentrated on compensation. Some of the studies suggest that organizations having long-term incentive plans for their executives had larger increases in return on equity over a four-year period than did other organizations, Abowd (1990) who found that the degree to which managerial compensation was based on an organization’s financial performance was significantly related to future financial performance and Gerhart and Milkovich (1990) suggested that organizations with pay plans that included a greater amount of performance contingent pay achieved superior financial performance. In combination, these studies indicate that organizations with stronger pay-for-performance norms

achieved better long-term financial performance than did organizations with weaker pay-for-performance norms.

Another important strategic HR practice is job security. A workforce with employees feeling secure in their jobs is vital to building a competitive advantage through people (Pfeffer, 1995). Studies by Lawler, Mohrman and Ledford (1992) observed that the link between job security and organizational commitment is behind the rise of high performance-commitment work systems and is the cornerstone of HR strategies in several organizations. Job security is also believed to be an important element of the Japanese and German employment systems. Delery and Doty (1996) also found that job security enhances firm performance. In summary, the degree to which employees are given job security has profound strategic implications. Job description is also identified as an important strategic HR practice as it is used as the foundation of virtually every other HR activity from recruitment and selection, training, performance appraisal to compensation. There are theoretical (Likert, 1967) and empirical (Huselid, 1995; Delery & Doty, 1996) studies linking employee participation to greater productivity and satisfaction. The foregoing discussion show that strategic HR practices are related to productivity.

Empirical studies utilizing the contingency perspective show that an organization should implement HR practices that encourage those employee behaviors that are consistent with the organization’s strategy. This alignment of strategy and HR practices allows organizations to achieve superior performance. In a study of 30 steel “mini-mills”, Arthur (1994) found that those with “commitment” human resource systems, emphasizing the development of employee commitment, had lower turnover and scrap rates and higher productivity than firms with “control” systems, emphasizing efficiency and the reduction of labor costs.

Configurational notions are currently incorporated in empirical SHRM studies. Numerous authors have attempted to develop *apriori* typologies of effective HR systems and link the performance of

HR systems to firm strategy. For example, Miles and Snow (1984) and Arthur (1992) developed multiple equally effective combinations of HR practices and argued that the different sets of practices are suited for different firm strategies. Similarly, configurational ideas are incorporated in empirical SHRM studies when researchers attempt to identify configurations of HR practices that predict superior performance when used in association with each other or the correct strategy, or both. Similarly, MacDuffie (1995) derived specific configurations, or “bundles” of HR practices that enhance firm performance. Using data from 62 automotive assembly plants, he found that “bundles” of internally consistent HRM practices were associated with higher productivity and quality. This is clearly an argument in support of a configurational perspective.

It is clear from the preceding discussions that strategic HR practices are related to productivity and that the process of investigating this relationship can go along any or a combination of three different approaches: universalistic, contingency or configurational perspectives. The current study adopts the universalistic model for several reasons. First, most strategic HR researchers have tended to take a universal view of HR practices and firm performance, focusing on the extent to which a set of practices is used across all employees of a firm as well as the consistency of these practices across firms. This suggests that the predominant approach is the universal perspective. Secondly, following the universal perspective offers an opportunity to investigate the relative contributions of each HR practice on firm performance. Shaw, et al. (1998) pointed that although both Arthur (1994) and Huselid (1995) found significant relationship between bundles of HR practices and different measures of effectiveness, their studies shed little light on the specific HR practices that are most effective. They noted that “perhaps only HR practice explains all the effects found in their research, or perhaps several effects are interdependent or synergistic. The actual effects of HR practices may also be over-or under-estimated using these (bundles, systems) approaches”. Therefore the

choice of universalistic perspective is consistent with prior studies.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT AND METHOD

The variable of primary interest, the dependent variable in this research, is productivity, the variance of which is attempted to be explained by strategic HR practices as independent variables. Strategic HR practices ensure that the pool of human resources available to a firm is unique, both difficult to imitate and substituted for. This ensures long term performance as well as competitive edge to the firms. In other words, strategic HR practices should contribute to high productivity, which forms the basis of the hypothesis of this study:

There is a significant positive relationship between strategic HR practices and productivity

The measurement for strategic HR practices were adapted from Delery & Doty's (1996) study. The authors identified and used seven practices. These are: internal career opportunities, formal training systems, appraisal measures, profit sharing, employment security, voice mechanisms, and job definition. Apart from the fact that these practices are popular they are chosen here in the interest of parsimony and ease of understanding for estate managers. Examples of questions are “We have a clear career opportunity for field workers” and “We allow field workers to make decisions about their jobs”. The 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Never” and 5 = “Very Often”) was used. In the case of productivity, we followed Saiyadain and Ahmad (1997) who asked managers to report the amount of Fresh Fruit Bunch (FFB) they produced per hectare over the 1998 financial year. This is common measure used in the Annual Reports of plantation companies and with which estate managers are familiar. The dimensions of productivity explored are average productivities of land, labor, capital and overall productivity.

Apart from guidance from the literature, expert opinion was sought to determine the face and content validity of the measures used in the questionnaire. These include experts in the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Human Resource Managers and staff in and around Penang Island (Bayan Lepas and Seberang Jaya), students in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program in the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia from Intel Computers, Seagate, etc., In addition, we sought clarifications of some estate managers in the neighbouring states of Kedah and Perak. For the purpose of data analysis and hypothesis evaluation, several statistical techniques (such as factor analysis and linear regression) were utilized from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows software, version 9.0 (Norusis, 1999).

Factor and reliability analysis were conducted to understand the dimensionality of the strategic HR practices measurements adopted. Four significant factors emerged from the factor analysis with loadings ranging from .86 to .64. The factors are named JOB DESCRIPTION (Cronbach alpha = .86), FORMAL TRAINING (Cronbach alpha = .75), PARTICIPATION (Cronbach alpha = .68) and JOB SECURITY (Cronbach alpha = .63). Factor 5 is not included because of low reliability (Cronbach alpha = .11). These are by and large as adopted from Delery & Doty (1996). These factors were utilized for hypothesis testing.

RESULTS

A total of 802 questionnaires were posted to estate managers and 185 were returned and out of this number, 129 were deemed usable for analysis. This represents an effective response rate of 16.1% ($129/802 \times 100$). Responding managers for this study are drawn from 4 states. Johore tops the list with 51 estates or 39.5%, followed by Pahang (31.0%). Similarly, 21 estates representing 16.3% are from Sabah and the remaining 13.2% from Perak. The highest number of managers (70.0) are Malays, followed by Indians (18%) and Chinese (12%). This is not surprising because the plantation sector is and will always be a rural sector where more Malays and Indians reside. During colonial times, Indians from South India were imported to work in the estates. After independence, the government opened up land for poor Malays to pioneer the plantations in rubber and palm oil under public schemes such as FELDA and RISDA. The respondents are almost equally from the public and private sectors. Most of the managers are married (90%). Their average age is about 46 years. About one-third or 36% attained up to secondary school education, another half (47%) have diplomas and other types of advanced level education and 17.0% are graduates. In terms of productivity, private estates are significantly more productive than their counterparts in the public sector as summarized in the following table.

Table 1
One-Way Anova: Productivity in the Estates (tons/hectare)

Productivity Indices (tons/hectare)	Public Private				
	M	SD	M	SD	F
Fresh fruit Bunch (FFB)	17.45	3.99	18.68	2.89	13.88**
Palm oil	2.90	0.65	3.43	0.61	13.70**
Palm kernel	0.74	0.26	1.05	0.25	24.23**

Significance levels: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

The result of One-Way Analysis of Variance in table 1 above indicates that private estates seem to have higher levels of productivity per hectare than public estates in all the measures of productivity and the difference is statistically significant in all cases (p – value < .001). The 4 factors that emerged from the factor analysis for strategic HR practices were regressed on the different indices of productivity to evaluate our hypothesis using the following model to calculate and plot the regression equations.

Where:

- Y Productivity
- α Constant term
- β Coefficient of regression
- X₁ Job description
- X₂ Job security
- X₃ Formal training
- X₄ Participation
- e Error term, assumed to be random with mean zero

$$Y = \alpha + \beta X_1 + \beta X_2 + \beta X_3 + \beta X_4 + \beta X_5 + e$$

The following table is a summary of the results.

Table 2
Impact of Strategic HR practices on Productivity.

Independent Variables	Land Prod	Labour Prod	Machine Prod	Overall Prod
R ²	.71	.076	.211	.073
	Standardized Coefficients (β)			
Job Description	-	-	-	-
Formal Training	-	-	-.303*	-
Participation	-	-	-	-
Job Security	.263*	-	-	-

Significance level * p value < .05; “-” = Results not significant

From table 2 above, the impact of job security reached the conventional level of significance ($R^2 = .071$, $B = .263$, P – value < .05), providing a partial support for our hypothesis. However, contrary to expectation, job description and participation were not related to productivity. Further, formal training was negatively associated with machine productivity ($B = -.303$, p – value < .05).

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is discovered that one dimension of strategic HR practices (job security) appear to be associated with productivity. The study by Huselid, et al. (1997) bears

some resemblance to and some differences from these results. They found that strategic HR practices were significantly associated with productivity and corporate financial performance. The finding that job security influences productivity is also supported by another study (Delery & Doty, 1996) among bank tellers in the U.S. The present study finds that job description is not related to productivity in the estates. This is surprising because it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of a thorough and accurate job description on firm performance. Ivancevich (1995) observed that job description is used as the foundation of virtually every other HR activity from recruitment and selection, training, performance appraisal to compensation. Two possible explanations are offered. First, it could be due

to the simple nature of the job in the estates. Secondly, it could also be that the ability of the workers to comprehend the job description does not necessitate a job description. However, these results are not isolated cases. Other studies such as the one by Delery and Doty (1996) found that job description was not associated with the two measures of performance they used: return on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE). The lack of importance for participation and formal training is another surprising finding. In the case of participation, the results contradict previous theoretical (Likert, 1967) and empirical (Huselid, 1995; Delery & Doty, 1996) studies linking employee participation to greater productivity, satisfaction and reduction in turnover. One possible interpretation is that estates implement more technical HR practice whereby day-to-day or operational matters are predominant and less emphasis is placed on more strategic and long term-oriented practices like participative management. This is not surprising judging from the fact that the organization structure of the plantation sector is described as "highly bureaucratic" (Goldthorpe, 1994)

Two managerial implications are suggested by the result of this study. First, there is evidence in this and other studies supporting the assertion that strategic HR practices enhance productivity. This convincing evidence may help managers to justify attempts to procure the resources needed to implement strategic HR practice along those of their colleagues in accounting and finance, for example. Secondly, another important message to managers is that the greatest potential gains for the estates are through increases in implementing strategic HR practice, a domain in which they are currently least proficient. This represents a significant opportunity for continuing gains in productivity and Malaysia's leadership in the export market for palm oil product. This course of action is superior from a strategic point of view rather than increases in technical HR practices which can be imitated easily by competitors.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution due to some limitations. This research was

conducted in one sector only—the oil palm plantation sector. Thus results of this research may not be generalized to firms in other sectors. This is even more so in the case of firms competing in environments characterized by lower levels of institutionalization HR practices such as large multinational firms in manufacturing, service and other sectors in Malaysia and in other countries.

In terms of methodology, measures of strategic HR practices were determined through surveys of single respondents in each firm: personnel officers/estate managers. In spite of the steps taken and the fact that the respondent gathered reasonably correlate in the expected direction, indicating that responses were not simply "noises", it is difficult to completely rule out the potential for response bias in the measures. A related issue is the measure of performance used. Consistent with the objective of the present study, we concentrated on a single measure of firm performance (i.e. productivity). Other measures may include return on assets (ROA), returns on equity (ROE) and non-financial measures like customer satisfaction, etc. Clearly therefore, future researchers should address this problem by utilizing multiple respondents and multiple measures of performance.

Another issue related to performance as a dependent variable in HRM research is the focus on who stands to gain from improved firm performance. In most cases, researchers, as in the present study, concentrate on single stakeholders: the shareholders or owners of the businesses. An important extension of the present work would be to consider potential costs and benefits of technical and strategic HRM to constituencies other than shareholders. For example, the success of firms that employ effective HR practices not only should enable them to generate higher earnings for the shareholders but also provide opportunities and lay off fewer people during economic downturns (Weitzman & Kruse, 1990; Huselid, 1995). In addition, customers also should be considered. This will provide the field with a more balanced score card approach to measure performance that act as a theoretical guidance

for research as well as practical guidance for HR practitioners, who can then develop HRM systems that capture the potential gains for all concerned.

Furthermore, this study utilized the universalistic framework of strategic HR research. This perspective assumes that certain HR practices will always lead to better (or worse) performance (Delery & Doty, 1996). This is only one of the three perspectives available to study the impact of strategic HR practices on firm performance. The other perspective is the contingent perspective which assumes the effectiveness of HR practices is contingent on the type of strategy a given firm (or organization) adopts. The other is the configurational perspective which assumes synergistic effects among HR practices (Delery & Doty, 1996; Ferris, et al., 1999). The challenge for future research is to assess their effects in empirical research.

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