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Dynamic and customer-oriented workplaces Implications for HRM practice and research

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Abstract

Changes in competitive environments are resulting in changes to the nature of work. We present job structure changes and a heightened customer orientation as two primary examples of changes that necessitate adaptation of human resource management (HRM) practices. The level of success in light of these organizational changes will largely be determined by how effectively people are managed in the new organizational environments. HRM practices that adapt to the new organizational conditions can add tremendously to the business and be a key to long-term competitiveness. We examine the implications of these changes for HRM practice and research, with particular attention to psychological contracts, job analysis, selection, and performance appraisal. The thrust of the article is to identify and describe research directions that have the potential for contributing to the future relevance and success of HRM. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The quality movement has brought with it many changes in both workplace philosophy and practice (Deming, 1986). While specific quality programs and techniques have fallen in and out of favor, the overall quality movement has, in our opinion, had a substantial and

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lasting impact on how work is organized and approached in organizations. For example, the quality movement has led to leaner and more fluid organizations with a greater emphasis on team structures and employee empowerment. Such changes represent a significant departure for organizations as a whole as well as for their functional components, such as the human resource management (HRM) department. To be effective and continue to add value, HRM activities must be congruent with their organizational environment. Organizational changes brought about by the quality movement and shifts toward team structures and empowerment raise two critical issues: (1) Do organizational trends call for changes in selection, performance appraisal, and other HRM practices? and (2) What implications do these changes have for HRM research?

The purpose of this article is to address the above two questions. We focus on two categories of organizational response to the quality movement: job structure changes and a heightened customer orientation. These categories of change may be familiar concepts, but our observation is that aspects of HRM practice and research have yet to adapt to these changes. Systematic survey information is not available concerning these changes, but they seem to be largely recognized as trends in the popular business press (e.g., Howard, 1995; Stewart, 1996) and are beginning to be recognized as important issues in the scholarly literature (Capelli et al., 1998; Cascio, 1995).

After considering these categories of organizational change, we address the importance of adaptation to these changes in HRM practices and research. We then identify major ways in which HRM can adapt to the organizational changes and explore the implications of these adaptations for HRM research. While the inclusion of implications for all facets of practice and research is beyond the scope of this article, we focus on four prevalent aspects of HRM research: psychological contracts,³ job analysis, selection, and performance appraisal. We include a review of leading HRM journals and conclude that while shifts toward team structures and employee empowerment are generally acknowledged in the literature, such shifts have largely not been incorporated into HRM research as evidenced by their scant integration into the four aspects examined.

A simple but important assumption underlying the thrust of this article is that people are a critical resource in organizations and a means for sustainable competitive advantage, a position consistent with the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). As the diffusion of technology levels the organizational playing field, it is people who can make the difference in the degree of success attained by an organization (Huselid, 1995). The effective management of human resources (HR) thus becomes a key vehicle for developing and improving organizational effectiveness (Pfeffer, 1995). For example, Pfeffer (1995) has illustrated with case examples how HRM practices such as employment security and incentive pay can promote a positive organizational culture and increase productivity. No doubt, such practices are effective and are to be commended. However, rather than stable employment security, many organizational environments have been punctuated with down-

³ While psychological contracts do not constitute an HRM function, the topic is included here because of the impact psychological contracts can have on HRM effectiveness. Further, psychological contracts can be influenced by HRM functions, such as training and compensation, and by changes in the external and work environments. For our purposes in this paper, we approach psychological contracts from this latter perspective.

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