



Human resource management and project based organizing: Fertile ground, missed opportunities and prospects for closer connections

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Abstract

We explore publishing trends regarding HRM and PBO in the main journals in the field of project management to highlight key empirical and theoretical contributions during the period 1996–2016. We offer three contributions to the field of project management. The first is theoretical where we analyze twenty years of research in key project management journals by adapting and extending the framework of Wright and Boswell (2002), and identifying categories of HRM research at three levels of analysis. This analysis provides an overview integrating exemplary research to date on the HRM-PBO link at different levels, showing areas where research is well-developed and also areas that, while promising, have not been examined in a systematic manner to date.

Our second contribution is that we highlight a variety of theoretical as well as methodological resources from the HRM field that can be applied in project studies and in so doing promote cross-fertilization of ideas and approaches between these two fields.

Finally, a key managerial contribution is that we introduce *the project as a temporary organization* level of analysis, explicitly making visible HRM practices on the project. This can guide both HRM practitioners, and project managers, in terms of the importance of projects as sites for human resource management and employment activities including careers, employee participation and employment relations all of which are critical issues and deserve more attention.

Executive summary: Building on the work of J. Rodney Turner, our article reports publishing trends on the intersection between HRM (human resource management) and PBO (project based organizing) in the key research-led journals of the project management field. We examine scholarship covering single and multiple practices, and different levels of analysis, to provide a comprehensive overview of key empirical and theoretical contributions published in the International Journal of Project Management, Project Management Journal, and International Journal of Projects in Managing Business between 1996 and 2016.

We use a framework that we adapted and extended from the work of Wright and Boswell (2002) to identify categories of HRM research. By reconsidering the levels of analysis identified in the original framework in light of projects and their managerial and organizational implications, we elaborated the original framework to differentiate between three different levels. First, the “supra-project organizational level/permanent organization” focuses on HRM in the permanent organization. The second level focuses on “projects as temporary organizations” and HRM *on the project*, and the third “individual” level focuses on HRM and individual roles. In addition we differentiate between “multiple” and “single” HRM tasks.

With this paper, we provide several contributions. The first contribution is an overview integrating exemplary research to date on the HRM-PBO link. Second, we identify areas where research is significantly developed and also point out areas that, while promising, have not been examined in a systematic manner to date. In general, our results show that while there was a low level of research on the HRM-PBO link in the early phase of our review period, this has given way to a steadily increasing level of attention for HRM as an important area of project studies.

The key contribution is that we introduce *the project as a temporary organization* level of analysis, explicitly making visible HRM practices on the project. This is one the one hand a theoretical contribution as a project becomes an explicit level of analysis, on the other hand it is also a managerial contribution, as it can guide both HRM practitioners, and project managers, in terms of the importance of projects as sites for human

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resource management and employment activities including careers, employee participation and employment relations all of which are critical issues and deserve more attention.

Finally, we identify promising areas for closer connections between HRM and projects. The HRM field can benefit from a richer and more highly contextualized focus on the complex, multi-actor, multi-level and multi-organizational setting of projects which are increasingly prevalent. As such, projects should become a more central concern of HRM scholars, not least because employees and managers, as well as those who represent them, are often drawn from these settings. The articles discussed in this review can provide a starting point for such studies to enrich the HRM field and further strengthen the field of project management.

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Keywords: HRM (human resource management); PBO (project based organizing); Levels of analysis

1. Introduction

This article builds on the work of J. Rodney Turner by exploring the link between HRM (human resource management) and PBO (project based organizing) (hereafter the HRM-PBO link). HRM is a vast area of scholarship. Among his manifold contributions to the scholarly field of project management is his work on HRM (human resource management) (Huemann et al., 2004; Keegan et al., 2012; Keegan and Turner, 2003; Turner et al., 2007, 2008). Turner's early work explored possibilities for "developing a theoretical basis for the project and process-based approach" (Turner & Keegan, 1999: 269) and covered HRM as well as governance, learning, knowledge management, and leadership (Keegan and Turner, 2001, 2002; Turner and Keegan, 1999; Turner and Müller, 2005). He found HRM research especially lacking in the project management research domain and ignored by most HRM journals.

HRM is a vast area of scholarship covering single and multiple practices, and different levels of analysis (Wright and Boswell, 2002), as well as themes such as managing people to create strategic contributions and achieving HR implementation and execution (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). Notwithstanding that any attempt to review this field is necessarily limited (Keegan and Boselie, 2006; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009; Marchington, 2015), we draw on the HRM research framework of Wright and Boswell (2002) to identify categories of HRM research. We also adapt and extend this framework to consider recent theoretical developments in mainstream HRM. More importantly, we reconsider the levels of analysis identified in the original work in light of projects and their managerial and organizational implications. We then identify fertile areas of research on the HRM-PBO link, and we highlight missed opportunities. To achieve this, we provide a schematic overview of research published in the *International Journal of Project Management* (IJPM) *Project Management Journal* (PMJ) and the *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* (IJMPB) during the period 1996–2016, tabulating key works on the HRM-PBO link. We then consider detailed exemplars from work published in IJPM over the last two decades.

Our review leads us to argue that greater clarity is needed in distinguishing at what level HRM-PBO studies are undertaken, and whether studies focus on individual or multiple/sets of practices. This clarity is required to allow a stronger focus on research that spans different levels, and on research that explains

how activities/practices at one level are presumed to influence outcomes at other levels.

2. Methodology

The research described in this paper is based on a review of the literature linking the domains of HRM and project based organizing. Journals were selected based on their influence in the scientific, academic and practitioner communities. The three journals chosen (PMJ, IJPM, IJMPB) represent the main journals in the field of project management. The authors defined a list of key words to guarantee a comprehensive and transparent research process. Project related key words as well as HRM related key words were used to search in the above identified journals. All project related key words were combined with all HRM related key words. Project related key words were project*, temporary organization as well as temporary organizing. HRM related key words were HRM, human resource management, HR, career, personnel, Human capital management, HC. The search included papers published between 1996 and 2016. This timeframe represent the development of the field in the last 20 years and gave adequate insights in trends, missing opportunities and prospects for closer connections.

3. State of the art in HRM-PBO research

To provide some context for the publishing patterns we identify in the period 1996–2016 in the three leading project management journals (IJPM, PMJ, IJMPB), it is worth noting briefly the situation as it is, and has been, regarding understanding of the HRM-PBO link. Noteworthy is that studies examining trends in publishing on project management generally highlighted a steady but rather low level of interest in HRM/personnel management issues in major project management journals (e.g. Crawford et al., 2006; Themistocleous and Wearne, 2000). Bredin and Söderlund (2011) reinforce this when they observe that "interest for studies that focus explicitly on HRM in project-based organizations has been rather low" (2011: 10). Huemann (2015: 5) argues on the basis of extensive research that "research into what projects – as temporary organizations in addition to the permanent structures in an organization – mean for the HRM system is rare".

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