Socially responsible HR practices and their effects on employees’ wellbeing: Empirical evidence from Catalonia, Spain

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A B S T R A C T

Corporate social responsibility towards employees has been promoted by international organizations that produced recommendations, conventions, principles and other documents to enhance job quality and wellbeing at work. However, much is still unknown about their effects. This article empirically analyses the effectiveness of several practices of human resource management, which are “responsible” according to those international institutions, in relation to three well-known dimensions of employees’ wellbeing at work: job stress, job satisfaction and trust in management. The empirical analysis is conducted for the case of Catalonia using information from the Quality of Work Life Survey for 2007. The results show that, in general, higher job quality increases employees’ wellbeing at work, but some practices are more effective than others for each specific wellbeing dimension. It is also noteworthy that some practices, such as job security and good environmental working conditions, seem to positively affect all domains of employees’ wellbeing at work.

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1. Introduction

In the human resource management (HRM) literature there is a fundamental question regarding potential trade-offs between organizational performance and employees’ wellbeing in contemporary organizations (Peccei, 2004). This highlights tensions between a managerialistic-oriented approach and criticism deriving from the critical management approach (Boxall, 2013). The main focus of mainstream approaches to HRM, and basically the “hard HRM” tradition with high performance work practices is on the firm’s performance and interest. Hence, the main goal of analysing the effects of HRM practices on employee outcomes has been to optimize resources towards the ultimate interests of the company (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000; Guest, 2011) with little emphasis on employees’ interests and wellbeing (Boxall & Macky, 2009; Kehoe & Wright, 2013). For the criticism perspective, employees’ commitment and involvement are seen only as mechanisms for achieving organizational results. The firm’s interests often prevailing over those of the employees (Goddard, 2004; Ramsay, Scholars, & Harley, 2000). Adverse effects can appear in employees, such as job stress and burn-out (Lopes, Lagoa, & Calapez, 2014; Ramsay et al., 2000). These have been studied much less than positive effects (Van de Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012).

Business ethics has emerged as a growing field of interest, and within this framework a “business case” (Vogel, 2005) for the ethical management of people can also be found, along with normative and evaluative prescriptions for contemporary HRM practices (Spencer, 2013). In some cases these have given rise to codes of conduct aimed at promoting ethical HRM practices (Diller, 1999). A value-laden ethical approach to HRM represents an important way forward in the analysis of the HRM–performance relationship. This approach involves organizations taking care of employees’ needs and ensuring they are treated with due consideration for their wellbeing (Paauwe, 2009).

Employees’ needs and wellbeing are also the object of interest of international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the European Union and the United Nations Organization. They promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) in firms’ actions and management. One of the spheres of CSR is the management of employees, and codes of conduct, recommendations and so on have emerged from these organizations (Boiral, 2003; Diller, 1999). These are the basis for national actions that go in the same direction, that is, firms being “socially responsible” towards their employees.

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Our study focuses on CSR in the management of employees. There is little research on how those recommended responsible actions enhance employees’ wellbeing at work. The available empirical evidence is too scarce or too narrow in scope to provide generalizations or a clear view of the extent and nature of responsible HRM practices, especially in Spanish companies. Most of the studies conducted to date obtain corporate information mainly from CSR business reports, labour agreements, surveys, or interviews with company managers and executives (Instituto de Estudios Laborales, 2006), without addressing the perception of the affected and interested party, the employees themselves (Aragón, Rocha, & Cruces, 2005). One of the most widely adopted voluntary initiatives in Spain is that of codes of conduct (Aragón & Rocha, 2004), and the most widespread business actions focus on improving job quality in the areas of health and safety at work, training, equal opportunities, job creation and preservation, and internal communication. Studies for large companies show that labour policies and practices had evolved little in recent years (previous to the economic crisis), with training, internal communication, and risk prevention being the areas gaining most ground (Instituto de Estudios Laborales, 2006; Media Responsable, 2007). Fewer studies exist in small and medium size companies; they point to a progressive incorporation of conciliatory measures between working and personal life, work flexibility, mentoring systems and personalized training (Murillo, 2008). However, trade unions have decreed a poorly defined inclusion of CSR in collective bargaining and a still embryonic state of social responsiveness in the management of human resources (Observatorio de la Responsabilidad Social, 2009). None of this scarce information has been compared with other data. We remain unaware of the extent to which responsible HRM is effectively implemented, and how far formal commitments made by companies are actually executed. With our study we contribute to fill this gap. We perform an empirical analysis of the case of Catalonia, Spain, with a large representative sample of employees, and several HRM practices. Catalonia has received little attention on this score, even though it is one of the most economically active regions in Spain and accounts for a large number of employees. In addition, previous studies analyze employees’ satisfaction, but not other dimensions of wellbeing at work.

By focusing our attention on employees’ interest rather than firms’ performance as the ultimate objective, we are differentiating our analysis from others that are more common in the HRM literature, primarily based on the “mainstream” HRM approach, where the analysis is centred on discovering which practices are more relevant for high employee performance, as this is assumed to ultimately improve the firm’s performance. Our basic objective is to obtain information on which responsible HRM practices contribute most to enhance each dimension of employee wellbeing at work (job satisfaction, trust in management and job stress). The HRM practices chosen are those in the “job quality” sphere of CSR as understood by the aforementioned international bodies promoting CSR. This study may be a first step towards further analysis of employees’ wellbeing at work and how CSR can improve it.

The article is organized as follows. The next section briefly introduces CSR as the framework of our empirical analysis. It includes reference to the guidelines recommendations, directives and similar documents on CSR from the ILO, the EU, the GRI and other organizations as they frame CSR in HRM. “Responsible” HRM practices are also presented. Section 3 offers a brief review of previous studies on the effects of HRM practices on the three dimensions of employee wellbeing we are analysing. Section 4 includes the data and method of analysis; Section 5 the results; and Section 6 is the discussion and conclusions of the article.

2. Corporate social responsibility in human resource management

There is a growing concern about job quality and employees’ wellbeing. Arguments for and against enhancing job quality are subject to academic scrutiny (see, for example, Cloutier-Villeneuve, 2012; Spencer, 2013). Incorporating CSR into HRM may be a way of integrating employees’ wellbeing within the workplace. CSR includes many theories and approaches. Corporate social performance (CSP) (Wood, 1991) offers a general model which frames our empirical research, CSP includes three elements: CSR principles (such as equality and fairness); corporate social responsiveness (for example, fair remuneration); and the social results obtained from responsiveness (such as employees’ job satisfaction and trust in management).

However, difficulties still exist in making CSR operational (Dahlsrud, 2008; Garriga & Ménet, 2004; Lee, 2008). In practice, parameters for socially responsible labour management are basically defined through the conventions, principles, regulations, directives, etc., drawn up by these diverse international bodies and institutions that promote CSR (ILO’s labour conventions; the European Commission Green Paper of 2001 (European Commission, 2001a) and its COM 2002 and COM 2011 (European Commission, 2002, 2011); the Global Compact programme, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the ISO 26000, the OECD’s Guideline, the Social Accountability International certification (SA 8000) accrediting social responsibility, etc.). Recommendations from national bodies and institutions are also based on them. These documents do not offer a single list of “socially responsible” HRM practices, but they do include the main areas of action related to job quality (Celma, Martinez-Garcia, & Coenders, 2014): remuneration, recruitment, training, internal information and communication, health and safety in the workplace, equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and work/life balance. According to this approach, “being responsible”, or having a broad focus on job quality, refers to taking into account both objective characteristics of individual jobs and those relating to the general work environment (Cloutier-Villeneuve, 2012; European Commission, 2001b). It is responsible to reduce temporary contracts and increase job stability; to provide employee training that allows the employee to develop; and to provide an equitable remuneration, which can include a variable remuneration or profit sharing according to effort or results. It is also responsible to provide the employee with information, knowledge and channels of participation in the firm’s policies, to combat all types of discrimination at work, and to ensure health and security at work and a balanced combination of work and personal life.

In Spain, and specifically in Catalonia, there is very little information about the practice of CSR in the management of employees (Celma et al., 2014). Numerous examples of good practices already exist in many companies in Catalonia, as in European countries in general, but it is difficult to establish generally applicable conclusions regarding CSR practice, especially in the area of HRM. This is partly due to a shortage of academic and informative studies, providing clear empirical evidence (Celma et al., 2014; Diller, 1999).

3. Previous research on HRM practices and employee wellbeing

For employees’ subjective wellbeing at work we have considered the dimensions most frequently encountered in the literature (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007; Origo & Pagani, 2009; Pouliakas & Theodossiou, 2010; Salvatori, 2010; Van de Voorde et al., 2012). First, there is happiness-related wellbeing, which is based on subjective experiences and functioning at work. It is empiri-
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