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Employees' perceptions of high-performance work systems and innovative behaviour: The role of exploratory learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the influence of employees' perceptions of high-performance work systems (HPWSs) on employees' exploratory learning and innovative behaviour. Furthermore, the mediating role of exploratory learning in this relationship has also been studied. To achieve these objectives, a quantitative analysis was conducted with a sample of 304 researchers from the Spanish public sector. Results showed the relevance of employees' perceptions of HPWSs in promoting exploratory learning and employees' innovative behaviour. The mediating role of exploratory learning in the relationship was assessed. The paper mentions the importance of workers' perceptions on the implementation of HPWSs and their impact on employees' behaviour. The paper also presents practical and theoretical implications.

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1. Introduction

The human resource management (HRM) literature has focused on examining the relationship between HRM practices, which are considered as a system, and organisational performance (Huselid, 1995) from a macro perspective. However, the literature does not clearly address how HRM practices affect performance outcomes (Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg & Croon, 2013). To this end, researchers have increasingly adopted a micro perspective to disentangle the mechanisms through which this relationship is established (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008). From this micro viewpoint, employees' reactions (attitudinal and behavioural responses) to HRM practices have been analysed (Baluch, Salge, & Piening, 2013; Katou & Budhwar, 2010; Nishii et al., 2008) and are seen as the means through which this relationship is established. It transpires that employees' reactions play an essential role in explaining this relationship, and consequently some authors emphasise the need to include employees' perceptions in HRM research (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Nishii & Wright, 2008; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015).

Chang (2005) defines employees' perceptions of HRM practices as the expression of the beliefs an employee experiences about

these practices in an organisation. Although employee reactions and perceptions are seen to be central in clarifying the mediating mechanism in the HRM practice–performance relationship, this relevance is not evident in empirical research (Nishii & Wright, 2008; Wood, 2009, pp. 55–74). Following the above arguments, this paper focuses on employees' perceptions of HRM practices as more proximal predictors of individual attitudes and behaviours (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Nishii et al., 2008). Analysing employees' perceptions provides a framework for studying how employees experience or perceive the high-performance work systems (HPWSs) implemented by managers and how the former influences individual attitudes and behaviours (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013).

The research presented here focuses on innovative behaviour (IB) as a particular kind of individual behaviour, which is of great significance to organisational effectiveness, efficacy and survival (Scott & Bruce, 1994; West, Hirst, Richter, & Shipton, 2004). Employees' IB refers to the ability of individuals to generate new ideas and viewpoints, which are subsequently transformed into innovation. Bearing in mind that the creation of innovation lies in ideas and how individuals develop them, an analysis of the aspects that facilitate IB becomes critical. In this regard, some studies have focused on the influence of factors, such as the role of supervisor support (Dysvik, Kuvaas, & Buch, 2014; Janssen, 2005; Yuan & Woodman, 2010), work characteristics (Farr & Ford, 1990, pp. 63–80; Oldham & Cummings, 1996), and organisational climate

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and culture (Scott & Bruce, 1994). Nevertheless, there is scarce empirical evidence to explain how several aspects of individual and contextual nature (e.g. employees' perceptions of HRM practices) may have an effect on employees' IB (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004).

Another relevant issue for IB is exploratory learning. Exploratory learning is a type of individual learning composed of two complementary dimensions: information acquisition and information interpretation (Flores, Zheng, Rau, & Thomas, 2012). From a conceptual perspective, exploration implies the generation of new ideas through an active search for viewpoints, alternatives and different perspectives (Danneels, 2002). Therefore, the implementation of some HRM practices and how they are perceived by employees will foster their exploratory learning and, consequently, their innovations (Shipton, West, Dawson, Birdi, & Patterson, 2006).

Taking into account the aforementioned arguments, this manuscript contributes to the literature by adopting a two-fold approach and analysing new unexplored relations based on two basic arguments: first, IB and exploratory learning are triggered through employees' perceptions of HPWSs and, second, exploratory learning is a *sine qua non* condition for employees' IB. Thus, considering these preliminary arguments, the following basic goals for the research presented here are as follows. The first aim was to explore whether employees' perceptions of HPWSs are linked to IB and exploratory learning, whereas the second aim was to analyse the mediating role of exploratory learning in the relationship between employees' perceptions of HPWSs and IB.

The results obtained contribute to the literature on learning and innovation micro-foundations, showing the relevance of employees' perceptions of HPWSs to exploratory learning and IB. In addition, the results contribute to this literature by establishing that the existence of exploratory learning is a necessary condition for IB and that HPWSs clearly stimulate the existence of exploratory learning at an individual level. Consequently, managers should design HRM practices to facilitate an exploratory learning context and process if organisational strategic goals are to be based on the achievement of IB. The existence of this particular context and of individual IB plays a vital role in organisations, such as universities and research centres, where innovation is a way of transferring (e.g. through cooperation agreements) the knowledge they develop to companies. Individuals working in research centres and universities constitute our research sample.

2. Theoretical review

2.1. Perceptions of HPWSs and employees' IB

Traditional literature on HRM has focused on the analysis of HRM practices and performance from different perspectives. One of the most outstanding approaches is the system approach (Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006; Delery & Doty, 1996). Under this viewpoint, the joint consideration of some sets of HR practices results in superior performance than other alternative perspectives (e.g. individual practice approach; see Combs et al., 2006). In this regard, Boxall, Ang, and Bartram (2011) highlighted the fact that these practices must be considered together as some of them have an influence on others. For example, selection or career development is related to training as sometimes a new employee requires particular preparation and cultural indoctrination to adapt him to the new job specifications (in some specific jobs, general knowledge or skills are not enough to perform it correctly). These sets or configurations of practices have been labelled as high-performance or high-commitment practices (HPWSs) in the specialist literature and are designed to promote employees' skills and behaviours (Huselid, 1995; Way, 2002) to achieve organisational strategic

goals. The work presented here is based on this approach.

Despite a lack of agreement in the specialist literature about how to accurately define HPWSs (Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995) and the HR practices contained in them (Boxall & Purcell, 2008), numerous important studies on the topic suggest that HPWSs are a bundle of practices that normally include and refer to selection, training, career development and motivation practices, such as performance appraisal, pay for performance and job security.

The effect of HR practices on employees' attitudes and behaviours becomes a chain of successive effects (Boxall, 2012). First, such practices need to be formulated by managers and will subsequently have to be implemented throughout the organisation. However, the formulation and implementation of these practices are not going to guarantee the 'expected' result on employees if they are not correctly perceived. Therefore, perception plays a primary role when we are talking about modifying individual attitudes, behaviours and outcomes (Takeuchi & Takeuchi, 2013).

To this respect, Shen et al. (2014) following the social exchange theory, which proposed a direct relationship between perceived organisational support and organisational outcomes (particularly organisational citizenship behaviour and work performance). Their results showed that if employees perceive that their goals are taken into account, they will be more productive and reduce their absenteeism. In turn, Greco, Cricelli, and Grimaldi (2013) and Accard (2015) showed the relevance of perceptions on performance evaluation and results. Similarly, bounded rationality and rational choice theory explain that perceptions are influenced by our background and cognitive limitations, making us interpret some HR practices in different ways. Consequently, our perceptions make us evaluate a situation in a specific way and influence our behaviour.

When relating perceptions to HR practices, authors such as Agarwala (2003) or Alfes et al. (2013) highlighted that there are few studies analysing how individuals experience the interventions suggested by HRM. More specifically, employees' attitudes and behaviours in a response to the HRM system depend on how individuals perceive the practices in their working context (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) rather than on what a manager says has been implemented. Accordingly, some studies showed that employees' perceptions of HRM practices are significantly different from the reports of the practices actually used by the firm (Liao, Toya, Lepak, & Hong, 2009). Farooq, Farooq, and Jasimuddin (2014) also showed the relationship between employee perceptions of corporate social responsibility (understood as some HR actions that send signals of recognition, such as extensive training, participation in decision-making and pay for performance) and knowledge-sharing behaviour. This article suggests that specific HR practices send clear signals that the organisation values its employees. Therefore, they feel confident and change their attitudes and behaviours, contributing to organisational performance. Again, the role of perceptions becomes crucial in this change.

Conversely, researchers have analysed the effects of HPWSs on different kind of outcomes such as profitability and productivity, financial performance, commitment and satisfaction (Huselid, 1995; Verbarg, Den Hartog, & Koopman, 2007), or, more recently, innovation performance (Beugelsdijk, 2008; Lau & Ngo, 2004). However, specialised literature draws attention to the analysis of the effects of HPWSs on employees' behaviour (Grant & Shields, 2002; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Macky & Boxall, 2007). Therefore, in line with our research aims, we focused on the effect of the perceptions of HPWSs on a particular behaviour, in this case, IB. In this regard, we considered innovation from a behavioural perspective (Janssen, 2001; 2005) and defined IB as 'all the behaviours through which employees can contribute to the innovation process', particularly focusing on behaviours oriented towards the generation and application of ideas (De Jong & Den Hartog,

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