



Bridging the research-practice gap in modern human resource management

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Knowledge transfer challenge
Knowledge production challenge
Human resource management science-practice gap

ABSTRACT

As an applied field of management, human resource management (HRM) scholars strive to impact practice, which is still considered a major challenge. This paper focuses on how academic work can be meaningfully integrated with modern HRM practice by showing how rigorous academic work can successfully inform HRM in practice and how scholars and practitioners can co-create rigorous and relevant HRM knowledge. In particular, we illustrate how theoretical insights connected to the shaping, implementation, embeddedness, impact, and effectiveness of HRM practices are helpful in addressing core questions related to progress in a practical way, well-being, and performance at work. In addition, we show how HRM scholars and practitioners can collectively develop knowledge about emerging HRM topics through co-sponsored PhD research. We conclude by reflecting upon the role of academia and practice in bridging the HRM's science-practice gap.

1. Bridging the research-practice gap in modern human resource management

As an applied field of management, human resource (HR) management scholars are involved in influencing/impacting HR management practice. Successfully doing so is still considered a grand challenge facing (HR) management scholars (Banks et al., 2016; Banks et al., 2021). Although scholarly interest has grown in recent years, bridging the gap between research and practice in HRM remains elusive (De Frutos-Belizón et al., 2021). The past literature has identified various factors that contribute to (HR) management's science-practice gap (e.g., Bansal et al., 2012; DeNisi et al., 2014; Rynes et al., 2001), such as findings from academic research not being assessable and understandable for practitioners and useful in addressing problems related to managing people at work. These factors can be broadly grouped into two categories (Shapiro et al., 2007): *knowledge transfer challenges*, which refer to challenges in translating and disseminating the research findings into actionable insights for practitioners, and *knowledge production challenges*, which relate to tensions between the rigor of HR studies (e.g., generalizable, theory-informed, empirically-proven causal insights) with their practical relevance in meeting context-specific organizational challenges of HR practice.

Attempts have been made to bridge the research-practice gap in (HR) management by tackling both issues. Theoretical perspectives have been applied to gain more insight into the causes and potential solutions to the science-practice gap. For example, drawing on stakeholder theory and using a grounded theory approach, Banks et al. (2016) developed theoretical models that emphasize the importance of attending to the needs of academics and practitioners to facilitate knowledge creation and promote effective knowledge

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transfer. Relying on cognitive and heuristic information processing and conservation of resources theory, Bozic et al. (2022) presented a grounded theoretical model of practitioner-centered enablers and barriers to management knowledge creation. Inspired by evidence-based medicine, Briner et al. (2009) position evidence-based management (EBMgt) as a management decision-making approach whereby insights from research evidence are integrated with evidence from the local context, practitioner expertise and judgment, and the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision. Moreover, several management scholars have also described their efforts and illustrated their approaches to bridging the gap between science and practice, sharing experiences with HR centers at the interface of research and practice (e.g., Center for Effective Organizations – Lawler III & Benson, 2022) and with networks to bridge business academics and practitioners (e.g., Network for Business Sustainability – Bansal & Sharma, 2021), thereby providing a unique understanding of (the process of) how research can impact practice. Unlike prior research that primarily conceptually explored the nature of the research-practice gap in the (HR) management field and described approaches to impact practice (De Frutos-Belizón et al., 2021; Negt & Haunschild, 2024), we focus on how academic work can be meaningfully integrated and aligned with 'modern' HRM practice. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to showcase (a) how rigorous academic work can successfully inform HRM in practice and (b) how HR scholars and practitioners can co-create rigorous and relevant HRM knowledge.

In relation to the challenge of knowledge transfer, we illustrate how core theoretical insights connected to the shaping, implementation, embeddedness, impact, and effectiveness of HRM practices are helpful in addressing five core questions related to progress in a practical way well-being and performance at work. First, related to the shaping of HRM practices, we pay attention to why HR practices differ per organization, sector, and country. Second, we zoom into the impact of HRM practices; we explore if and why it does pay off to invest in HRM. The third question concerns how to make the implemented HRM practices even more effective. Here, we focus on the importance of leadership and organizational climate, together responsible for creating a 'strong' meaningful work experience and decent levels of well-being. Fourth, related to the embeddedness of HRM practices, we will address the question of how to create a resourceful and enabling work situation to facilitate learning, well-being, health, and performance. Finally, aligning with the need to reflect upon the effectiveness of implemented HR practices, we assess whether the HR practices have succeeded in optimizing employee well-being and performance. Following a prescription adherence-based approach (Banks et al., 2021), we argue that these five key topics have progressed sufficiently in empirical research and evidence to translate and implement them into practice by organizations to improve performance and well-being and have found their way into the business/practitioner community. In other words, rigorous and relevant research has been conducted on these five HRM topics, and their practical implications seem to resonate.

Given the highly disruptive business context and the responding shifting landscape of HRM (e.g., Collings et al., 2021; Harney & Collings, 2021), translating established theoretical insights is not sufficient to address current challenges in HRM practice. For cutting-edge actual HRM topics, research might not be widely available, and theoretical insights might not be fully developed yet. These topics are particularly suitable for co-creating rigorous and relevant knowledge and insights (Bansal & Sharma, 2021). Related to the knowledge production challenges, we illustrate how HR scholars and practitioners can address more nascent HRM topics in need of clarification collectively in the context of combining Mode 1 and Mode 2 research, combining rigor and relevance simultaneously by making use of co-sponsored (business and academia) PhD research and joint supervision platforms.

We conclude by discussing common insights resulting from the illustrations on how proven theoretical HRM insights can be transferred into practice and how knowledge on nascent HRM challenges can be collectively produced. We also reflect more generally upon the role of academia and practice in bridging the (HR) management's science-practice gap.

2. Knowledge transfer challenge

Knowledge translation and dissemination has been identified as one of the main causes of the research-practice gap in HRM (Negt & Haunschild, 2024). Empirical support also suggests that the HR domain suffers from a research-practice gap related to communication difficulties between academics and practitioners. For example, based on a survey among 5000 HR professionals, Rynes et al. (2002) found that there are significant gaps between established research findings and what HR practitioners believe to be true. Apparently, disseminating actionable insights from rigorous HR research to HR practitioners and line managers is a challenge that prevents these key academic findings from being more widely used in business practice. A variety of reasons underlie this, such as that abstract generalizable academic insights published in scientific HR journals are not accessible to practitioners and are difficult to interpret and act on in their specific business context as they are written in an academic writing style (e.g., Gill, 2018; Kougiannou & Ridgway, 2021; Shapiro et al., 2007).

Instead of exploring these causes, we would like to illustrate how proven key theoretical insights resulting from rigorous academic work connected to the shaping, implementation, and impact of HRM practices on well-being and performance can be successfully translated to inform practice. To this end, we will demonstrate how HR practitioners can progress in a practical way well-being and performance at work based on key academic insights that help HR professionals and line managers to understand better what is going on in their daily reality and how they can impact their decision-making.¹ We also show how (some of these) insights have found their way into the HR business/practitioner community.

¹ Parts of this text are based on Paauwe, J. (2024). *Progressing performance and well-being at work. Travelling the loop*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 160 pp.

2.1. How are HRM practices shaped?

First, academic work inspired by institutional theories of organization and strategic management theories that account for and give insight into the role of context (Beer et al., 1985; Jackson et al., 2014) has the potential to provide actionable insights regarding the shaping of HR practices and interventions. More specifically, these insights will help the HR practitioner get a better feel for the conditions that impact the shaping of HR practices and why they differ per organization, sector, and country. Here, we present the contextually based Human Resource theory (CBHRT, Paauwe, 2004; Farndale & Paauwe, 2018), which explains in a scientific, well-proven way why HRM systems will differ in aligning added value (performance) and moral values (well-being, fairness, and legitimacy) per organization and per sector by integrating strategic management (competition, market) and institutional (legislation, rules, traditions, values) literature (e.g., Barney, 1991; Deephouse, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The framework starts with three contextual mechanisms that influence the adoption of HR practices. First, the competitive mechanisms arising from the marketplace, the firm's positioning amidst rival firms, and the technology it uses. In the context of non-profit organizations, this refers to the particular sector in which the organization operates and the specific budget requirements imposed on the organization by higher-level governing bodies. The second mechanism to consider are the institutional mechanisms, which stem from the whole set of rules, customs, and traditions of the regulatory setting within which the firm operates. For example, legislation, the prevailing economic system (liberal or coordinated market economy), and sectoral agreements between employers' federations and trade unions. The competitive mechanism is embedded in this institutional setting and has to take into account the social, cultural, and legal dimensions. Results based on a competitive, economic mindset may change due to the requirement to adhere to the institutional context, in which efficiency or effectiveness are not the primary criteria but rather factors like legitimacy and fairness. Each firm needs external legitimacy; if not, it risks stakeholders withdrawing their resources. Finally, the third factor relates to the importance of internal contextual factors within an organization: its culture, operational systems, and structure (the so-called heritage mechanisms). All are based on a set of interlinked strategic decisions, norms, and values from the past (that's why this dimension is called heritage mechanisms), which still, to a certain degree, constrain or facilitate present-day and future organizational activities.

These three mechanisms will interact and impact each other, potentially creating inherent tensions. From a competitive mechanisms perspective, firms need to differentiate themselves from others in order to achieve a distinct competitive advantage. Simultaneously, from an institutional standpoint, they need to adhere to various rules, habits, and traditions to be seen as legitimate. This implies a process of balancing the different contextual forces, which requires a customized approach for each organization to achieve a sustained competitive advantage. The key decision-makers, such as top management, the HR director, and the works council, will develop their choices for a strategic HRM system. They will be faced with the competitive setting (or budgetary constraints in the case of a non-profit organization) as well as the challenges arising out of the marketplace (or sector) and then decide on the kind of organizational capabilities the organization needs to have in order to survive in the marketplace. At the same time, they will assess the demands for compliance, legitimacy, and fairness based on the institutional setting in which the firm is operating while taking into consideration the constraints and opportunities of the firm's heritage. This implies that the key decision-makers have leeway for strategic choice.

The value of the CBHRT for practitioners is mainly in its use as a kind of force field analysis, examining the different factors affecting the shaping of HRM. The next step involves aligning the diverse demands arising out of both the competitive marketplace and the institutional setting in such a way that, through customized HRM systems, results in a sustained competitive advantage while at the same time safeguarding performance, well-being, and legitimacy. In this way, more than 1000 participants, representing hundreds of organizations, have applied the theoretical framework (Farndale & Paauwe, 2018) as a practical tool for analyzing their specific context.

2.2. What is the impact of HR practices?

The second key topic addresses the effect of HRM practices and interventions. Theoretical insights will help the HR practitioner understand why investing in (certain) HRM practices (for specific groups of workers) pays off. Since the early 1990s, the question of why HRM practices result in improved performance has dominated the academic field of strategic HRM (Guest, 2011; Paauwe, 2008). Multiple theoretical frameworks – at a higher level of abstraction have been applied to account for the link between HRM and performance (e.g., social exchange theory) (Jiang et al., 2013). We present two widely applied HRM theories that have proven to be effective in explaining why and when investments in HRM practices improve performance outcomes.

The first is the AMO framework, one of the most applied frameworks in strategic HRM to explain the performance effects of HRM practices (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Paauwe, 2008). AMO is the acronym for Abilities: an employee should have the right competencies, skills, and related attitudes and behaviors; Motivation: the employee should be willing and be motivated to do the job; and finally, Opportunity: the organization should enable the employee to do what they can and want to do (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). Appelbaum et al. (2000) integrated this framework into the HRM literature by reasoning and empirically demonstrating that HRM practices (such as selective recruitment, participation, development, collaboration, teamwork, autonomy, and performance-related pay) impact an employee's ability, motivation, and opportunities which subsequently positively impacts performance. As such, it has often been applied in the field of strategic HRM to gain insights into the processes by which bundles of an HRM system enhance the employee's AMO and subsequent performance (Kellner et al., 2019). Ability-enhancing HR practices (such as training, selective hiring, and recruitment) are designed to improve employees' skills and abilities; motivation-enhancing HR practices (such as compensation and performance appraisals) to increase employee motivation; and opportunity-enhancing HR practices (such as involvement in decision-

making, information sharing) to facilitate employees' opportunity to perform. Meta-analytical evidence was found to support that the different bundles positively impact outcomes such as retention, productivity, and financial performance (Subramony, 2009). Moreover, meta-analytical evidence (Jiang et al., 2012) based on 116 papers with data from more than 30.000 organizations showed that the AMO bundles differentially relate to employee's human capital and motivation, which were subsequently associated with other outcomes such as employee turnover, productivity, sales, and shareholders' value.

The AMO theory provided valuable and actionable insights into why investing in bundles of HR practices adds value to employee and financial outcomes. However, given the (limited) financial and managerial resources involved in attracting, selecting, developing, motivating, and enabling employees, HR investments must be carefully made to attain these performance benefits. HR professionals need to decide whether to invest in all employees or only in those with unique skills, knowledge, and abilities, which contribute disproportionately to performance variability. Insights from human capital theory and its application in strategic HRM literature might be particularly useful here (e.g., Huselid & Becker, 2011; Luo et al., 2021). Human capital theory, having its roots in labor economics, focuses on the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of people employed in an organization as a predictor of performance (Coff, 2002; Crook et al., 2011). Recent developments in this stream of literature concentrate on so-called strategic human capital resources and how these contribute to the enactment of the organization's strategy and competitive advantage (Ray et al., 2023). In strategic HRM, this line of thinking has led to the HR Architecture (Lepak & Snell, 1999) and the distinction between A, B, and C positions and players (Huselid et al., 2005a). Following the HR architecture, HRM investment should mainly target employees with unique (specific) and valuable (enacting strategies of the organization) human capital. The differentiated workforce approach also differentiates A, B, and C positions based on their strategic impact (direct, indirect, or little). Still, it adds variability in the performance and quality of the work displayed as an investment criterion. In particular, the differentiated workforce approach has found its way to inform the HR business community. The main ideas have been communicated in the Harvard Business Review (Huselid et al., 2005b) and its social media, practitioner-oriented books, including offering a method applicable to identify A, B, and C positions uniquely for an organization drawing on the experience of several organizations that successfully adopted this workforce management approach (e.g., Becker et al., 2009; Huselid, 2015).

2.3. How to make the implemented HRM practices more effective?

The third key theoretical insight builds upon the previous key insights by providing HR practitioners with valuable knowledge about how to make proven HR practices even more effective. Generally speaking, the effects of HR practices are highly dependent on leadership and the organizational climate (Jackson et al., 2014; Leroy et al., 2018). In this respect, the strategic HRM literature highlighted the importance of the HRM process alongside the content of HRM. Building on the SHRM process model (Nishii & Wright, 2008), line-manager enactment of the designed HR practices and employee perceptions of HR practices turned out to play an essential role in supporting the effectiveness of HR practices (Kehoe & Han, 2020; Pak & Kim, 2016). In particular, line managers often have the primary responsibility for implementing HR practices and thereby act as agents in sending unambiguous, clear, and consistent signals to employees about what is (strategically) important in the organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2006). We present the strengths of the HR system as a theoretical concept—empirically proven—that helps to understand how line managers can develop such a 'strong' situation in which the effectiveness of HR practices is supported (Bednall et al., 2022).

Bowen and Ostroff (2004), who developed this concept, start from the premise that HR practices can be considered as signals to employees about the kind of responses and behaviors that are expected, valued, and rewarded. This is the very start of psychological climate perceptions. However, the interpretation of the practices can or will be different per person, so these signals and their interpretation do not yet create a shared organizational climate. This implies that we need to make sure that there is a sense of common understanding among employees. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) call this a strong HRM system, for which they have identified nine different process mechanisms grouped under the heading of three meta-features: distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus. These three features have been derived from the attribution theory (Kelly, 1967) and the theory of strong situations (Mischel, 1973, 1977).

Distinctiveness implies that a situation (for example, a set of HR practices) stands out from the broader environment, that it is able to draw attention and will arouse interest (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004:208). For this to happen, the following four mechanisms are important: visibility of the HR practices, understandability of the HR practices, relevance of these practices for achieving both strategic as well as individual goals, and legitimacy/authority of the HR function (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016:197).

Consistency refers to the importance of consistency across time and cause-and-effect relationships. More specifically, Bowen and Ostroff distinguish three mechanisms: *Instrumentality*, implying clear cause-effect relationships between the desired content-focused behaviors (as desired by the HRM system) and associated consequences for employees; *validity* in the sense that HRM practices must have consistency between what they claim to do and what they actually do; and, finally *consistency in HRM messages*. The latter encompasses different forms of consistency, such as making sure that there is consistency between what senior managers say, what the goals and values of the organization are, and whether employees conclude the same based on their perceptions of HR practices. Another form of consistency is the internal alignment across HRM practices, better known as internal fit. A final form of consistency relates to consistency over time.

Consensus relates to the agreement among principal HRM decision makers, such as top, line, and HR managers, and the degree of fairness of HR practices. Agreement among these decision-makers will help to build consensus among employees, as they will be receiving similar communications. In this respect, it will also help if there is close interaction between top-line and HR managers (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004:212). Fairness will be achieved by simultaneously paying attention to distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (managers explaining openly and respectfully to employees the reason behind decisions and the distribution of outcomes) (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004:212).

In sum, these dimensions together make up the strength of the HRM system and will help to build shared perceptions in a unit or organization. For HR practitioners and line managers alike, it highlights the value of sending unambiguous, clear messages about priorities and values. Moreover, it provides valuable insights into how HR practitioners, in close collaboration with line management, can create a strong organizational climate for a particular strategic focus. In this way, the HRM system will be aligned with the strategic perspective of the organization and contribute to strengthening the HRM-Performance link (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016:197). Several instruments have been developed and validated to measure perceived HRM strength, which provides HR practitioners with a diagnostic tool to evaluate and benchmark the HRM system strength in their organizations (e.g., Delmotte et al., 2012; Hauff et al., 2016).

2.4. How to create a resourceful and enabling work situation facilitating learning, well-being and performance?

In addition to the importance of designing and effectively implementing HR practices that provide clear direction, goals, and consistent signals about what the organization values and wants to achieve for its customers and clients, a vast amount of academic research has shown the importance of creating a resourceful work situation to facilitate learning, well-being and health, and performance (e.g., Bakker et al., 2023; Humphrey et al., 2007). Several theoretical frameworks that have been empirically proven provide insights into how to develop a resource-rich work situation and the processes via which these work situations impact employees, e.g., the job demands-resources theory, the job design and job crafting literature, and the psychological contract literature (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Rousseau, 1995; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Based on recent business challenges reported in the media (such as the Volkswagen emissions scandal; Warrell, 2023, Me Too movement, Jaffe et al., 2021), we opted here for the theory, including convincing evidence, of psychological safety. The impact of corporate and 'Me Too' scandals is reflected in the steep increase in the frequency of the search term psychological safety on Google search since 2015 (Based on the website (Psychsafety, 2024). Psychological safety has been defined as "being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career" (Kahn, 1990, p. 708) and has also been widely applied in the context of teams (Edmondson, 1999). Suppose people are working in a psychologically safe team. In that case, they will easily voice ideas, be open to feedback, give honest feedback themselves, and be willing to collaborate, take risks, and dare to experiment (Edmondson, 1999).

Initially, the focus was mainly on how psychological safety facilitates team learning and performance, yet with the increase in empirical studies, other outcomes were also reported. Meta-analytical evidence shows that psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2017) is associated with greater reporting of treatment errors, more interpersonal communication, and better knowledge sharing among team members. In addition, employee perceptions of psychological safety have been shown to be related to firm performance in terms of return on assets and goal achievement, creativity, creative thinking, and risk-taking, as well as innovation in research and development teams and manufacturing process innovation performance. In sum, as there is ample evidence concerning the beneficial effects for employees, teams, and organizations, psychological safety is worthwhile to pursue as an HR practitioner.

Key insights from this theoretical framework have successfully found their way into the (HR) business community. In order to assess the level of psychological safety among employees, practitioners can make use of seven items for measuring it (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The main ideas have been communicated widely in professional journals (e.g., Harvard Business Review; Edmondson, 2021; MIT Sloan Management Review; Ferrère et al., 2022) and, social media (e.g., Podcasts) and popular books (e.g., Edmondson, 2018), offering practical guidance to establish psychological safety in teams and organizations. In addition several psychological safety trainings and workshops have been developed.

2.5. Have the HR practices succeeded in optimizing employee well-being and performance?

The final topic relates to key theoretical insights that help practitioners reflect on their selection and implementation of HR practices and create strong, resource-rich situations, which hopefully have optimized both performance and employee well-being. Insights from two streams of literature can be helpful here as they provide opportunities to understand better employee reactions and behaviors resulting from the implemented HR practices and work environment. The organizational justice literature (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2001) focuses on how employees perceive and judge the way their organization treats them from an ethical and moral perspective. Paying attention to employees' feelings of fairness and justice offers an opportunity to reflect and address these feelings that arise from the implemented HR practices and work environment. In addition, insights from the self-determination theory (SDT) (e.g., Deci et al., 2017) can help practitioners to reflect and act upon the extent to which employees' basic needs driving their behavior are fulfilled, nourished, or frustrated by their current work setting. In line with the trend of examining contemporary work through the lens of positive psychology and exploring the factors that enable individuals to flourish and thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), we chose to elaborate on self-determination theory here.

Self-determination starts from the premise that people display a natural process of self-motivation for growth and development and that the environment can facilitate or hinder this process (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT argues that in order to enable intrinsic motivation, growth, and well-being, three innate basic psychological needs -competence, relatedness, and autonomy- need to be satisfied. Competence refers to the need to build competence and develop new skills to gain mastery over the environment. Connection or relatedness is related to the need to have close relationships, to be connected, and to have a sense of belonging. Autonomy refers to the need to be in control of your own life and your behavior and feel psychologically free. The (un)fulfillment of these three needs drives human behavior. Meta-analytical evidence (Deci et al., 2017; Van Den Broeck et al., 2021) indicates that work-related factors are influential in creating a context in which these basic needs are either thwarted or nourished with implications for employee motivation, well-being, health, and performance.

The self-determination theory has found its way to inform the HR business community. Self-assessment items are available to assess

the degree to which the three basic needs have been met and fulfilled in an organization (e.g., [Van Den Broeck et al., 2021](#)). Moreover, inspired by self-determination theory, popular books and podcasts are available that offer techniques for applying these theoretical ideas into practice (e.g., Drive—the surprising truth about what motivates us; [Pink, 2011](#); the ABC of work motivation—how to energize any organization; [Van Den Broeck et al., 2024](#)).

3. Knowledge production challenge

A second issue at the core of the science-practitioner gap is the tension between the rigor of HR research (e.g., generalizable, theory-informed, empirically proven causal insights) and their practical relevance in meeting context-specific organizational challenges of HR practice ([Negt & Haunschild, 2024](#)). Academics and practitioners operate out of different logic and interests and with different time frames, resulting in academic research studying questions that are often of little relevance, use, and interest to (HR) practice (e.g., [Banks et al., 2016](#); [Bartunek & Rynes, 2014](#); [Markoulli et al., 2016](#)). In recent years, academics have recommended appreciating these tensions, respecting the two parties' unique strengths, building on these, and introducing so-called bridging mechanisms (e.g., [Bartunek & Rynes, 2014](#); [Guerci et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, achieving societal impact as a third goal of universities, next to teaching and research has increasingly been emphasized in the strategy of universities and has become also important in assessing research programs by outside bodies ([De Jong & Balaban, 2022](#)). Different bridging mechanisms are proposed and reflected upon, such as industry-engaged academic research encompassing, for example, academic co-authorship with practitioners and various types of collaborative management research ([Shani et al., 2008](#); [Timming & Macneil, 2023](#)). We focus on conducting collaborative research in which academics and practitioners co-create knowledge.

Co-creation implies aligning Mode 1 and Mode 2 research. Mode 1 research indicates traditional academic research that involves building and testing theories within a discipline with the aim of generating universal knowledge and insights based on context-free data and conclusions ([Guerci et al., 2019](#); [Kelemen & Bansal, 2002](#)). Mode 2, on the other hand, focuses on producing knowledge for application. Mode 2 knowledge is specific to particular situations and thus contextually embedded ([Guerci et al., 2019](#); [Kelemen & Bansal, 2002](#)). The two modes differ in the position and role of the researcher, who in Mode 1 is a detached and neutral observer. In contrast, in Mode 2, they are socially accountable, immersed, and reflexive actors, even up to the level of being a change agent ([Guerci et al., 2019](#)). In Mode 1, the working mode is characterized by achieving rigor in methods and analysis, while in Mode 2, the working mode is characterized by relevance ([Guerci et al., 2019](#); [Kelemen & Bansal, 2002](#)).

Co-creating, therefore, offers the opportunity to closely align the researcher's questions and outcomes with the manager's interests by collectively developing rigorous, relevant, and actionable HRM knowledge ([Guerci et al., 2023](#)). This approach seems particularly suitable for cutting-edge HRM topics, as research might not be widely available, and theoretical insights might not be fully developed yet ([Bansal & Sharma, 2021](#)). It has the potential to impact not only practice but also academia through high-quality journal publications. We illustrate how HR scholars and practitioners can collectively address emergent HRM topics that need clarification by using co-sponsored (business and academia) PhD research and joint supervision platforms. To do so, we drew from our experiences in supervising five of these joint PhD trajectories in the context of people analytics in the past ten years. We clustered these into the four stages of developing bridging mechanisms in HRM, inspired by the phase-based approach framework of [Guerci et al. \(2019\)](#).

3.1. Joint PhD trajectories to co-create knowledge

The first – exploration - phase concerns the initiation of a dialogue between HRM researchers and the business community to explore the need for and suitability of conducting collaborative research (i.e., the joint PhD trajectory). In our experience, establishing a trustworthy relationship between a university and the business community is an important first step. As a second step, it helps to create a specialized center (as part of a school or department of a university) for developing services and building up relationships with business community partners. In this way, a collaborative space for research ([Guerci et al., 2019](#)) is developed. Examples in this respect are the Centre for Advance Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) at Cornell University (USA) and the People Management Centre (PMC) at Tilburg University (the Netherlands). The PMC is engaged in services for a selected group of large companies, which mostly have their origin in the Netherlands. Activities encompass networking and knowledge sharing (through roundtables and newsletters), recruitment services (through internships and guest lectures), executive training programs, providing input in HR management team meetings, and, finally, joint research. All these activities help to build trust and an interest in conducting academic research within the company, which might culminate in the willingness of a company to commit itself to rigorous yet relevant research by co-sponsoring for four years a PhD trajectory. In this phase, an initial exploration of possible research questions takes place in which practitioners identify and commit to a broad topic that relates to the strategic priorities of the organization and is supported by top management, and the academics ensure its theoretical relevance. We have also learned the importance of developing a mutual understanding in these initial conversations about diverging standard time perspectives and logic in practice and academia. For example, academics prefer to operationalize constructs using validated scales of previously published research and collecting longitudinal survey data, whereas practitioners prefer to rely on proxy measures available in mostly organization-wide cross-sectional archival datasets that lack demographical details.

The resulting 4 to 5-year PhD trajectory presents a long-term partnership that allows academics and practitioners to provide space to conduct joint research by creating collaborative mechanisms and double-loop research processes (the third stage). Although challenging, we feel that this type of collaborative research offers the potential to embed researchers in a context of application and to embed practitioners in the academic knowledge-creating process. The fourth stage is about the challenge to legitimize this kind of research in both directions. For academia it is important to achieve a sufficient degree of rigor enabling to publish in academic

journals. Related to the business community maintaining a sufficient degree of relevance is important throughout the whole collaboration. Below, we will illustrate how we aim to reinforce this embedding and facilitate iterative research processes throughout the PhD trajectory.

Right from the start the PhD student is recruited and selected by the university *and* company in a joint effort to ensure that the candidate is motivated and capable of working within academia and practice. In addition, although the PhD student is officially employed by the university, in reality, they will work two days a week at the company and three days a week at the university. The PhD student will form part of the people analytics department and will carry out all kinds of projects to benefit the company. This offers the opportunity to get to know the people, company culture, how things are done, socialize, and build up credits by bringing in unique theoretical insights and methodological expertise and skills. At the start of the project, the two supervision teams (one from the company and one from the university) will have combined meetings to brainstorm on research projects, related methods, and data availability. The aim is to prepare a provisional research plan composed of four interrelated research projects that together make up the PhD thesis. Below, we describe four of these projects. Provisional here means that some degree of flexibility is important to react to potentially changing organizational conditions and priorities (e.g., mobility of CHRO and contact person; cross-border organizational merger) that might constrain planned research projects and/or offer emergent research opportunities.

From our experience, this type of long-term partnership provides the time and opportunity to identify pressing long-term business issues that are theoretically interesting, and that can be researched using rigorous research methodologies and newly collected or archival company data. This yields relevant, actionable, and academically publishable knowledge and insights. However, we have faced politics within the university and across the different companies during our PhD trajectories. It is important to note that the research team finds itself in a dependent position. Very often the PhD student is embedded in the people analytics department of the organization. This department can hierarchically be positioned in different ways, such as reporting directly to the CHRO or the Managing Board or being placed at a lower level, such as being part of a business analytics support function. Regardless of the hierarchical positioning, our experiences show that projects that are not too sensitive in nature and over which they have (some) control are most feasible. This means that projects ideally make use of existing data and/or are (will be) owned by the people analytics department.

In addition, it is important to ensure adequate senior management and broader stakeholder support for all research projects from the beginning. This can be achieved by engaging with the HR management team, ideally involving the highest-ranking HR officer (CHRO) and other important stakeholders (e.g., line management, legal and risk officers, and work councils) in the early stages of the research projects. Also, throughout the PhD trajectory, it is important to hold (top) management's attention by regularly updating them with interesting, relevant, and actionable research outcomes. It is, therefore, essential to develop stakeholder management capabilities and make sure that one is good at telling the story (outcomes of research projects) in a way that will appeal to the business. Finally, it is also important to legitimize this kind of research, both for academia (sufficient degree of rigor) and the business community (sufficient degree of relevance). For the involved academics, we feel it is important to be aware of the expectations of academic journals and PhD promotion committees to ensure that the research projects are publishable and the resulting PhD thesis is defendable. In our experience, it helps to focus on journals that also pay attention to the relevance and implications of your findings for practitioners. Moreover, this long-term partnership and the PhD student also working in the organization offer the opportunity to track the impact of the research. We now will illustrate some of the research projects we have been involved in as part of these PhD trajectories, followed by a brief reflection on their benefits.

3.2. Emergent HRM topics collectively addressed in joint PhD trajectories

Mobility analytics was the focal point of one of our PhD projects with a large, internationally operating oil company. Such companies invest a lot in social support programs for overseas assignments for their expatriates. These support programs are expensive, and

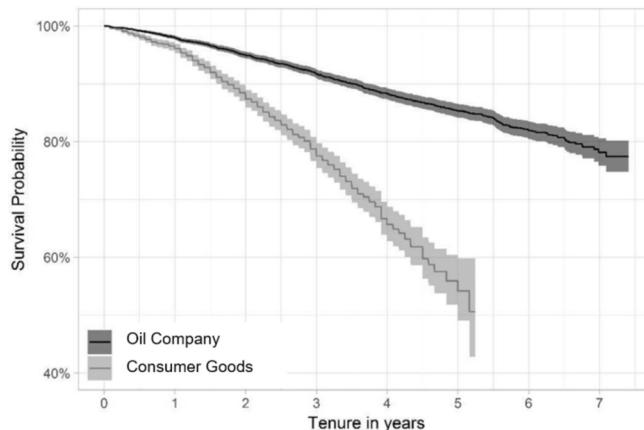


Fig. 1. Estimated Survival Curves. Note. Adapted from [Van Der Laken \(2018\)](#).

one can wonder: is it worth the money? How does it pay off in terms of retention, career progress, mobility, and voluntary turnover? Through our network of companies, we decided to involve another multinational company operating in fast-moving consumer goods markets. Contrasting these companies implied there would not be any risk of exchanging sensitive information with a rivaling firm. Both companies kept track of all their overseas assignments, related investments, and data on the persons involved for a number of years, including length of service, career progress, performance management data, and mobility. Both companies did not utilize data up until that moment. Using advanced statistical methods such as event history analysis (Allison, 1984), R package Survival (Therneau, 2015), and Cox proportional Hazard Regression Models (Cox, 1972; Therneau & Grambsch, 2000), the PhD student was able to make good use of the data and could present several interesting outcomes (Van Der Laken, 2018). Fig. 1 presents an example of the outcomes, showing the contrast in survival rates of cohorts of management trainees for two companies with striking differences. For the interpretation of these outcomes, it was important to be aware of the context (both internally and externally) of both companies and thanks to the joint PhD trajectory, the PhD student was intimately familiar with the differences in context between the companies, which helped to interpret the research findings appropriately.

In another PhD project, we collaborated with a multinational company in the financial sector to study how to develop a work environment that promotes employee well-being and enables employees to perform at their best. The involved organization collaborated with a consultancy agency to survey its employees. Initially, these survey data (of 5700 employees) were used to show the financial service organization's average scores on various well-being indicators (e.g., work pleasure, energy, and burn-out) and how these scores compared to the benchmark. Together with the people analytics department, which had access to the fully anonymized survey data, the PhD student and the university supervision team used a novel latent profile analysis to provide theory-informed (the Job Demands and Resources model, Demerouti et al., 2001) business-specific actionable insights on the factors associated with employee well-being and self-rated job performance (see Fig. 2). Throughout the process of publishing these findings in an academic journal (Peeters et al., 2021), organizational stakeholders were informed of the results and given suggestions on how to work with them. The stakeholders presented more in-depth findings to top management to ensure that evidence-based investments were made (Peeters, 2022).

The topic of the agile way of working was central to multiple research projects. The multinational company in the financial sector implemented this new working method for all its teams. While working at the company, the PhD student gained hands-on experience with this new approach. In another PhD trajectory, together with a multinational company a multinational organization in chemistry with applications in nutrition, health, and beauty, the (introduction of) agile way of working was the core topic. Also here, working within the organization provided the PhD student valuable opportunities to collaborate with individuals practicing the agile way of working and gain insights into their experience. From an academic perspective, this new phenomenon of agile way of working, having its origins in the software development industry, was relatively unexplored in the strategic HR and team literature. In one of the research projects, a team-level survey to measure the agile way of working was developed and, after rigorous validation based on data collection within the organization, added to the internal survey offerings of the organization and published in an academic journal

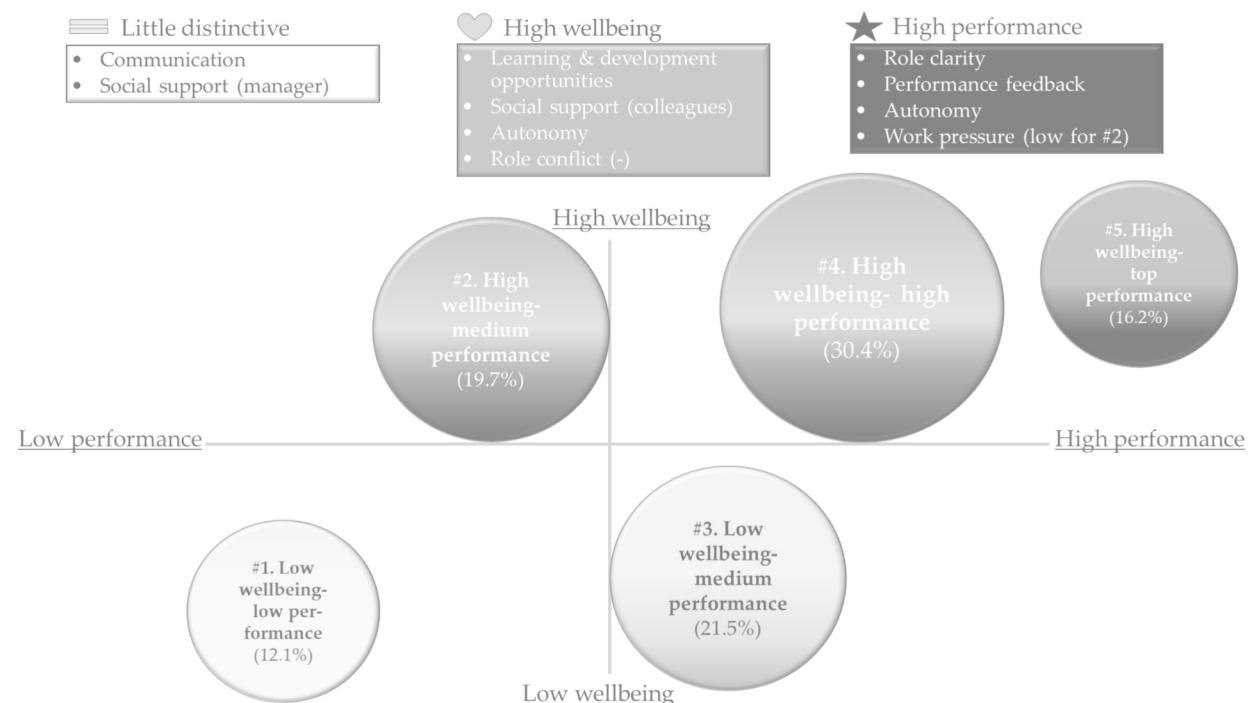


Fig. 2. Well-being Performance Profiles. Note. Adapted from Peeters et al. (2021).

(Peeters et al., 2022). In another research project, the involved PhD student developed a tailor-made dashboard summarizing the team-level scores on the agile way of working dimensions and offered this to participating organizations (among which the organization that sponsored this project) along with a session to explain the concepts and findings (Steegh, 2024). Another research project qualitatively explored the agile way of working and its interplay with HRM practices using case studies. The findings of these projects have been on invitation widely communicated within the business community (Steegh, 2024). Moreover, both research projects resulted in papers that are currently under review for publication in various academic journals.

3.3. Benefits of joint PhD trajectories

Apart from the benefit of identifying pressing business needs, which are also interesting from an academic perspective, additional benefits include getting access to existing or newly collected data. Not only at the partnering organization, but also at other companies by making use of the network of the business partner, for which they are willing to send a recommendation. This implies that both parties benefit from an extended knowledge network. The company gets access to the national and international network of the academic supervisory team, while the academic supervisory team is able to benefit from the domestic and international networks of the partner company. Next, being able to make use of existing survey data already collected by the company and connecting these to objective indicators for well-being and performance is a significant advantage and saves a lot of time and money. Moreover, it implies that these data will be used to their full potential, which is often not the case with the data provided by the agency carrying out the periodic employee engagement survey.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we showcased how rigorous academic work can successfully inform HRM in practice and how HR scholars and practitioners can co-create rigorous and relevant HRM knowledge by making use of co-sponsored (business and academia) PhD research and joint supervision platforms. We illustrated how core theoretical insights connected to the shaping, implementation, and impact of HRM practices provide valuable and actionable insights that have found their way into the business/practitioner community. In addition, we illustrated how HR scholars and practitioners can collectively address more emerging, novel HRM topics in need of clarification by making use of co-sponsored (business and academia) PhD research and joint supervision platforms. Establishing this type of research collaboration, although not without its own set of challenges, helped researchers explore and develop enriched - embedded in the business context - theoretical insights and helped practitioners make more theory-informed and data-driven decisions. In addition, although demanding, it is also appealing to work in a large organization while pursuing a PhD, as it offers plenty of extra learning opportunities, not only in terms of content but also with respect to internal dynamics, stakeholder management, and operational systems in place.

Beyond these more specific illustrations, we conclude by highlighting some important developments within academia and practice that facilitate bridging the (HR) management's science-practice gap. First, the recent growth of the evidence-based management (EBM) movement (Briner et al., 2009) has positively stimulated the uptake of HR practices and interventions known for their proven effectiveness. EBM, in short, derives principles from research evidence and translates these into practices that solve organizational problems (Rousseau, 2006, p. 256). Following EBM, HR decision-making requires the integration of professional expertise, organizational facts and characteristics, stakeholders' values and concerns, and the best available academic evidence. As such, it allows for a theory-informed decision-making process in a specific organizational setting and situation. We also notice that scholarly journals are more attentive to (qualitative) context-rich process-oriented research (e.g., Journal of Management – Bansal et al., 2024) and research with societal impact (e.g., Journal of Applied Psychology – Bauer et al., 2023). In addition, they actively work together with researchers of accepted papers to transform core findings from (HR) management research into actionable insights and disseminate these to the management community, for example, by providing video abstracts (Human Resource Management Journal), sharing interviews with the authors (Human Resource Management), or infographics and video clips (Academy of Management Insights). Finally, we also witnessed several emerging initiatives that made engagement in knowledge transfer more rewarding for academics. In the Netherlands, universities committed themselves to widening the assessment practices and careers for academic staff, moving away from an overly one-sided emphasis on research performance to include teaching, research, impact, and leadership-oriented assessments and multiple career paths (including one with a focus on impact; Recognition and Rewards: Room for everyone's talent, 2024). Moreover, in some countries, national research assessment also includes an assessment of the impact of scholarly research on practice (both its reach and significance) (e.g., the Netherlands; VSNU, KNAW, NWO, 2020).

Given the significant disruptive business context and the responding shifting landscape of HRM, we believe that proven insights from past research might not always be helpful in addressing these emerging business and societal challenges. The dynamic nature of these challenges makes them par excellence suited for the integration of research processes within HR management practice by cocreating knowledge and insights to address these (Bansal & Sharma, 2021). These all necessitate the collaboration of universities and the business (public) sector in an eco-systems approach. De facto universities will then start to display characteristics of the so-called fourth-generation university (Van De Mheen, 2019). One particular dynamic technological challenge we are thinking of is the continuously evolving application of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and its technical and social implications for HRM, work processes, quality of work, and workers (Budhwar et al., 2023).

We hope that our paper can serve as an initial point of departure and reflection on how academic work can be meaningfully integrated and aligned with 'modern' human resource management practice to the benefit of all parties involved.

All authors have seen and approved the final version of the manuscript being submitted.

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