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[Title:]

HRM implementation levers: a multiple case study of the implementability of HRM tools

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[Abstract:] A qualitative study of HRM programmes in eight different organizations was set up in order to identify factors, called implementability levers, that contributed to the implementability of those programmes. Three types of those levers were found, related to, respectively, the proces of the programme implementation (example: the involvement of line managers in the programme development), the content of the programme (example: the adaptibility of the programme) and the programme's context (example: the accessibility of the HRM department for involved line managers). Levers in each of the categories appeared to have, as regards their impact on the programme's implementability, a bright as well as a dark side: they tended to promote, in some specific way, as well as to hamper, in another specific way, the implementation of programmes. Taking care of programme implementability thus shows up as a doable, but puzzling, change management-like task of HR managers.

[Keywords:] Human Resource Management, Implementation, Devolution

## HRM implementation levers: a multiple case study of the implementability of HRM tools

The work of HR-professionals most often involves the instruction and support of other people. This state of affairs derives from the principle of devolution (see, for instance, Cunningham & Hyman, 1999), which tends to be applied to a higher or lesser degree in all organizations. This principle implies that middle and other managers in the organization are made accountable for HRM tasks such as organizing the performance appraisal of their coworkers, or carrying out the organization's business ethics and diversity policy in their departments. The role of HR managers is, as a consequence, mainly an indirect one: providing other organization members with tools for carrying out HRM-duties. In the sections to come a multiple case study is presented which was set up in order to enhance our understanding of this feature of the HR-manager's job. More specifically the study addressed the question what HR-managers can do in order to make sure that other organization members do indeed make use of their tools. As will be elaborated and explained below, this question is framed in terms of the promotion of programme implementability. It is a study about what HR-managers can do in order to secure a sound implementation of their programmes.

HRM effectiveness = content quality \* implementability

HR-professionals develop tools (performance appraisal procedures, pay and promotion systems, diversity programmes *etc.*) for other organization members, mainly line managers, and subsequently help these members to

effectively utilize those tools. Stated otherwise, line managers are the primary consumers of HRM services. They are the first responsible for the management of their human resources, while HR-managers are responsible for the development of adequate tools to that end. This being the case, the question arises what, exactly, constitutes the adequateness of those tools and what are, consequently, the key responsibilities of HR managers. It is a question that touches the identity of the HRM profession.

It goes without saying that the adequateness of - to take an example - a performance appraisal system relates to the quality of the system components (the sample of performances that are appraised, the measurement instruments that are used for appraising those performances, *etc.*). HR-professionals tend to pay a lot of attention, therefore, to components like that. That, actually, is at the heart of the body of knowledge the HRM profession is imbued with: HR professionals are appraisal experts, recruitment experts, compensation experts, training experts and so on.

There is, though, another constituent of the adequateness of HRM tools, which is as indispensable as the quality of their contents but which does not automatically come into view when an HRM-department sets out to develop those tools. Apart from being well-developed as regards its contents, an HRM tool needs to be set up in such a way that those who are supposed to use it feel inclined and enabled to do so. We speak, then, about the implementability of HRM tools. Content quality on the one hand and implementability on the other hand form, by themselves, an essential condition for effective HRM. HRM effectiveness, or HRM value, can thus be equated to the product of these two entities:  $\text{HRM effectiveness} = \text{HRM content quality} * \text{HRM implementability}$ .

Only if both entities are sufficiently paid attention to, HRM can be said to have done a good job. As for the second entity, implementability, this will be elaborated on in remaining sections of this paper.

HRM includes the care of HRM implementability

Above the HR manager's task was described as *providing other organization members with the tools for carrying out HRM-duties and subsequently help those managers and coworkers to utilize those tools*'.

Worded this way the HRM task includes the care of implementability no less than content quality. Paying attention to implementability is, actually, the most straightforward approach for closing the well-documented (*cf.* Caldwell, 2004, Khilji & Wang, 2006) gap between intended and enacted HRM. It corresponds to the task of 'making things happen in the day-to-day life of the organization' that Gratton & Truss (2003) singled out as one of the pillars of HRM. It would be an ill-conceived form of devolution to pass on this task to line managers, if only because those organization members tend to be poorly equipped for that job (Nehles, Terhalle, Van Riemsdijk & Looise, 2009). Rather than providing the solution of the implementation problem, line managers form part of that problem, and who else than HRM can be expected to play the role of problem solver?

In HRM handbooks little attention tends to be paid to this feature of the HRM job. To come to a first articulation of it can be said to be the aim of the study presented in this text.

## Implementation levers in the hands of HRM

In change management literature a three-fold distinction tends to be made as regards factors that promote the implementation of organizational changes (Pettigrew, 1985, 1987, Buchanan & Boddy, 1992, Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999, Self, Armenakis & Schraeder, 2007): change content related, change process related and change context related factors. Content related factors have to do with *what* is being changed, process related factors have to do with *how* change is brought about and context related changes have to do with *where* this is done. A content related factor is, for instance, the inclusion into a change programme of new competencies that have to be learned by employees. A process related factor is, for instance, the enactment of a top-down change strategy. A context related factor, finally, is for instance a highly competitive environment where the organization finds itself in (external context), or a low level of employees' trust in management (internal context).

Generally speaking, the task to take care of the implementability of a change programme, whether or not HRM related, is a matter of optimizing the whole of content, process and context factors. If applied to the job of HR managers, this statement gives rise to the question what content, process and context factors play a role when HRM tools are introduced. This, basically, is the question that is addressed in the study presented here. For generically denoting the factors involved, the term *implementation levers* will be used from now on. Once we have identified the effectual implementation levers, we will be able to give concrete shape to the HR manager's task of securing the implementability of his/her tools.

The implementation levers we look for have to promote, self-evidently, the implementability of HRM programmes, but need, in addition to that, also to be manageable by the involved HR professionals, rather than being something given. The focus is thus on levers in the hands of HRM and our research question consequently reads, in full, *what manageable implementation levers play a role when HRM tools are introduced in an organization?*

As will be elaborated below, we come to hypothesize the existence of eight implementation levers, three content related ones, three process related ones and two context related ones (listed in Table 3, first column). The content ones are: ‘programme adaptability’, ‘programme embeddedness’ and ‘programme simplicity’. The process ones are: ‘participative programme development’, ‘attention to organizational politics’ and ‘gradualness of introduction’. The context ones, finally, are ‘HRM’s co-workership’ and ‘HRM’s accessibility’.

*Lever 1: Programme adaptability (content related)*

A change programme can be more or less fixed, that is, more or less uniformly regulated for all involved actors and more or less made unadjustable for a certain period. This holds for HRM programmes as well. When an HR-professional develops, for instance, a new tool for career coaching to be applied by managers, he/she can decide to prescribe in detail the way the tool has to be handled with or, in contrast, to let managers largely free therewith and provide room, in doing so, for adaptations and modifications. Detailed prescriptions can be worthwhile from a strict HRM point of view, which may,

for instance for fairness reasons, value a long term uniform enactment of the tool for all involved employees. From an implementability point of view, however, detailed prescriptions can backfire, as they may fail to entirely fit the specific situation each involved manager may sooner or later find him/herself in. For that reason programme adaptability is hypothesized to have a positive impact on the implementability of HRM programmes. Adaptability is defined, then, as the degree to which involved organization members, when enacting an HRM programme, have freedom as regards the way they do so, or, conversely stated, the degree to which they are bound by strict rules and procedures.

*Lever 2: Programme embeddedness (content related)*

A new HRM tool that is going to be introduced does, by definition, not form part of existing routines in the organization because it is supposed to add something essentially new to those routines. That is not to say, however, that it is in all respects a *Fremdkörper* in the organization as one can choose to model the new tool in such a way that discrepancies with existing routines are minimized. A new compensation tool, for instance, can be linked to an existing HRM cycle, rather than being simply added to the whole of existing regulations. From an implementability point of view, minimization of discrepancies with existing routines may be a wise approach because it diminishes the newness of a tool for the involved actors and consequently reduces the efforts they have to invest in applying it. Positively stated, we may hypothesize, therefore, that an HRM tool is the more implementable, the more it is embedded in (rather than added to) existing processes in the organization.

Programme embeddedness is defined, then, as the degree to which an HRM programme fits in with existing processes in the organization or, conversely stated, the degree to which it is disconnected to those processes.

*Lever 3: Programme simplicity (content related)*

Change takes time. This truism is known to give rise to quite understandable and down-to-earth implementation problems (*cf.* Sirkin, Keenan & Jackson, 2005). For that reason it is important to reduce the burden of implementation for the actors involved as much as possible and a straight way of doing so is stripping a change programme of anything that is not a basic necessity. From an implementation point of view, the dilemma between, on the one hand, the tendency to enrich a programme's content with all kinds of nice details and, on the other hand, the striving for simplicity, can best be solved, therefore, by unrestrictedly opting for the latter alternative. Programme simplicity is thus hypothesized to have a positive impact on the implementability HRM programmes. Simplicity is defined, then, as the degree to which a programme is devoid of elements that are hard to grasp for the actors involved.

*Lever 4: Participative programme development (process related)*

In the change management literature many change management strategies are described and discussed. Among the most advocated ones is the so-called participative change strategy, also called the collaborative or



consultative mode of change management, or, in short, OD (organization development) (cf. Stace & Dunphy, 1991). It is a change management approach that allows many actors in the organization, both low and high in the hierarchy, to exert influence on change related decisions and courses of action. The co-decision making of involved organization members, which is the key characteristic of it, serves as an instrument for optimizing the quality of decisions that are taken while simultaneously creating positive attitudes towards intended changes among the participating organization members. This mechanism might very well apply to the introduction of HRM programmes. Co-decision making by the involved supervising managers may help to promote the acceptability as well as the doability of those programmes and consequently enhance the implementability thereof. We may hypothesize, therefore, that an HRM tool is the more implementable, the more it was developed in a participative way. Participative programme development is defined, then, as the degree to which those who have to enact an HRM programme were enabled to contribute to its development or, conversely stated, the degree to which they were confronted with a programme that was entirely developed by other people.

*Lever 5: Attention to organizational politics (process related)*

An organization is a political arena. Chosen courses of actions in it reflect to a large extent the prevailing power relations in it. Attempts to change things within an organization are, as a consequence, doomed to failure as long as those power relations are not skillfully taken into account (cf. Boddy &

Buchanan, 1992). This evidently holds unrestrictedly for the introduction of HRM programmes as well, if only because of the lack of intra-organizational formal power of the HRM departments themselves. HR managers, for performing their task well, simply need to play the power game (Silvester, 2008). Accordingly, we hypothesize that HRM tools are the more implementable in an organization, the more the HR department takes intra-organizational power relations into account when developing and introducing those tools, or in short: the more attention they give to organizational politics. Attention to organizational politics is defined, then, as the degree to which power relations within the organization have been taken into account when an HRM programme was developed and introduced, or conversely stated, the degree it to which was developed and introduced irrespective of intra-organizational power relations.

*Lever 6: Gradualness of introduction (process related)*

In the change management literature a distinction is made between, on the one hand, organizational change through the realization of small successive changes, and on the other hand change through a abrupt major shift in the organization's practices. It is a matter of gradualness of the management of change process. There are pros and cons associated with both of these two change strategies (Rafferty & Simons, 2006, Dunphy & Stace, 1988, 1993), but from an implementation point of view the first one, the most gradual one, is clearly the most preferable one because it does not involve massive revolutionary transformations. We may hypothesize, therefore, that an HRM tool is the more implementable, the more it is introduced gradually. Gradualness is defined, then, as the degree to which the introduction

process is split up in a number of small steps while those steps are taken one at a time, rather than simultaneously.

*Levers 7 and 8: HRM's co-workership and accessibility (context related)*

The implementability of a change programme, as was posited above, depends on the change context. To promote the implementability of their programmes change agents have no choice, therefore, but to positively manipulate that context. Especially in the case of HR-managers in the role of change agent, however, the possibilities to do so are limited. Conditions in the external change context (the organization's environment) as well as the internal context (the organization itself) are largely given, or decided on by other actors. There is, though, another side of this medal. The HR managers themselves form part of the internal context of the changes that their tools and programmes are supposed to bring about and at least that part of the internal context is something that an HRM department can try to optimize for implementability reasons. More specifically, it can position itself in such a way that it does everything possible to remove implementation barriers. To that end it has to play a servant role *vis-à-vis* those organization members who are supposed to enact its programmes. It can take a part of the implementation burden itself, for instance by taking care of the administrative elements of an HRM programme. Or it can organize itself as a desk for information and support which can be consulted by organization members any time they are confronted with implementation related problems. We label a stance of an HRM department like that 'HRM-coworkership' and 'HRM's accessibility'

respectively and thus hypothesize that HRM tools are the more implementable in an organization, the more the HRM department displays coworkership and accessibility. HRM's co-workership is defined, then, as the degree to which the HRM department relieves the work load or otherwise facilitates the task of organization members whose task is to enact an HRM programme. And HRM's accessibility is defined as the degree to which the HRM department can be contacted for help and advice each time those who have to enact an HRM programme are in need of help and advice.

### Research questions

In the preceding section eight levers were hypothesized to promote the implementability of HRM programmes. Together, the eight resulting hypotheses constitute the main research questions that are addressed in the study presented in this paper. An umbrella question, worded in the introductory section, that over-arches these hypotheses, read: what manageable implementation levers play a role when HRM tools are introduced in an organization? As an additional and separate question, this umbrella question is added to the octet of hypotheses. It is not associated with any specific lever, and is included in order trace levers, other than the ones that were explicitly hypothesized.

### Research method

For testing the research hypotheses and finding additional answers to the umbrella research question, a multiple case-study of eight different HRM programmes that had been introduced in eight different organization was

conducted, mainly based on interviews with involved organization members.

The programmes that were studied dealt with the development of competencies and/or the enrichment of career opportunities of personnel. The organizations where the programmes had been introduced were: two universities, one assurance company, one plant of a production firm, one government agency, one child care institution and two providers of adult care.

As for each case, interviews were planned with three types of respondents: a representative of the HRM department, a line manager who was involved in the HRM programme under study, and an employee involved in that programme. In one case (the production plant), an interview with an employee could not be arranged in time. In the other cases each of the three planned interviews were fully realized.

The interviews were strictly set up, which is something different from strictly structured. As will be explained below, they were, actually, rather unstructured, but nonetheless aimed at the collection of well-specified data.

During the interview the respondent was made familiar with the study's key concept of programme implementability, as well as the concepts of the eight hypothesized implementation levers (programme adaptability, programme embeddedness etc.). This occurred in 'lecturettes', that is, teaching-like intermezzo's before questions related to those concepts were asked. Apart from an initial broad and open question that will be described below, the questions that were asked related to one lever at a time and served to gather information pertinent to the hypothesis associated with the lever involved.

In Table 1 the questions that were asked as regards each lever are listed. The goal of asking the whole of them was to invite the respondent to critically consider his/her experiences with the implementation of the HRM programme under study, and to articulate his/her understanding of those experiences. The respondent's knowledge of the situation, including his/her knowledge of the mechanisms that played a role, were – so to say – elicited. Quite often this proved to be a very hard job to do for respondents, especially as they were induced to refrain as much as possible from giving sheer opinions, and to mention facts only instead.

As can be seen in Table 1, only the answers that were given to interview question 5 are, strictly speaking, relevant for answering the research questions because by means of that (key) question the respondent was invited to expose his/her experiences with the impacts of the lever under discussion. That is not to say, though, that the other questions were dispensable. Three of them (numbers 1, 2 and 4) were preliminary ones that served to create a meaningful context for asking question 5, whereas questions 3 and 6 served to validate the answers that were given. The information that was collected through question 5, however, was used as input for composing answers to the research questions (see the results section).

The series of interview questions about the eight hypothesized levers constituted, actually, the second half of the interview. The preceding first half was simply launched by a general question that invited the respondent to tell about whatever factor he/she could think of, that had played a role, positively or negatively, as regards the implementability of the HRM programme under discussion. Each factor that was subsequently mentioned by the respondent,

was, thereafter, dealt with in the same way as was to be done with the hypothesized levers. The six questions in Table 1 were thus applied for each lever that was spontaneously put forward by the respondent. Information gathered that way partly coincided with information from the second half of the interview, and partly supplemented the information gathered there by highlighting implementation levers that had not been hypothesized in advance. In the latter case, the information was used for answering the (umbrella) research question that was subsumed as a question additional to the hypotheses.

In the next section the results derived from the second interview half will be presented first. Thereafter supplementing results from the first interview half will be given.

## Results

### *Analysis of interview outcomes related to the hypotheses*

The answers given to these two questions, which referred to the mechanisms related to the six hypothesized implementation levers, were compiled in such a way that for each lever the mechanisms that were indentified by at least one respondent (derived from question 5 answers), as far as the answers were sufficiently fact based (derived from question 6 answers), were distilled from the body of answers given. The result is an overview of the mechanisms that turned out to be associated with the levers in the cases studied.

There were minor differences as regards the answers given by the HR managers, the line managers and the employees. The general pattern of the answers given, though, pointed to a substantial impact of each of the hypothesized factors on implementability. That is not to say, however, that the hypotheses were confirmed because in a number of cases the impact was a negative, rather than a positive one (as was hypothesized). Only the factor “HRM accessibility” appeared to play a positive role in each of the eight organizations in the study. The remaining five factors turned out to have a dark side no less than a bright side: each of them had a positive impact on implementability in some of the cases, while having a negative impact in other cases. Answers given to interview question 5 (see above: ‘what mechanisms strengthened or weakened the implementability?’) provided lots of explanations of this state of affairs. In sum, the results make clear that a variety of both promoting and obstructing mechanisms, associated with the six hypothesized factors, tend to impact on the implementability of HRM programmes.

#### *Results, exploratory part of the study*

The complicatedness of the results generated by the hypothesis testing part of the study, was augmented by the additional results that derived from the exploratory part of the study. All in all, sixteen factors (including the six hypothesized ones, see Table 1) could be derived from the experiences that were expounded by the respondents in the interviews.

#### *Conclusion*

Taken together, the results of the hypothesis testing and the exploratory part of the study make clear that the implementability of HRM programmes is a relevant as well as manageable issue for HR managers. In addition to that, the results showed that a multitude of factors and mechanisms can be fruitfully utilized for securing and optimizing HRM implementability. As they are now, the outcomes are still in need of validation, because they resulted from a single qualitative piece of research only. They are, moreover, in need of integration and



simplification, as the whole of them can't be said to be highly parsimonious. A natural follow-up study (which is, actually, in an advanced stage already) is therefore a quantitative study, consisting of 1) the development of a tool for measuring the sixteen factors that were identified in the present study, and 2) the measurement of those factors in a big sample of HRM implementation cases together with a measurement of implementation success. The number of empirically distinguishable factors may be reduced, then, to a convenient amount of factor clusters, while a beginning can be made, subsequently, with the study of the predictiveness of those clusters for the successfulness of HTM implementation.

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Table 1 Interview questions, successively asked for each implementation lever

Question	Note taking	Reason for asking
1 To what degree was the lever present in the respondent's case? (e.g.: how flexible was the programme?)	Coding: Number in the range 1 (low) – 10 (high)	Setting the stage for question 5
2 In what way it was present? (e.g. what, exactly, made the programme flexible, or unflexible?)	Answer, summarized	Setting the stage for question 5
3 What evidence underlies the answers given to the first two questions.	Coding: Verified fact Repondent's observation Repondent's experience Repondent's impression Repondent's view View of other people	Validating the answers given (to what degree do those answers reflect more than private opinions or impressions?)
4 Did the lever play a positive and/or a negative role as regards the programme's implementability?	Coding: + (positive) or – (negative), together with number in the range 1 (low) – 10 (high)	Setting the stage for question 5
5 In what way did it play that role? (what mechanisms strengthened, or weakened, the implementability?)	Answer, summarized	Information gathering, pertinent to research questions
6 What evidence underlies the answers given on the fourth and fifth question	See question 3	See question 3

Table 2.1 Impact of implementation lever 'programme adaptability'

	Mechanisms giving rise to positive impact	Mechanisms giving rise to negative impact	Mechanisms giving rise to zero impact
High level of lever	Prevention of irrelevancies Personalisation, customization of programme Creates eventually higher quality of the program through ongoing adaption	Erosion of norms that underlie the programme	---
Low level of lever	Clarity of programme structure Communicability of programme Understandability of programme Strength, forcingness of programme Motivatingness of clear programme goals Highly appreciated programme transparency Development of common language	Resistance through 'not invented here' reactions Misfit with specific local needs Resistance	

	Everyone is treated equal Stability, which creates certainty for participants	through 'not being heard' complaints Targets are not met	
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Table 2.2. Factors that mediate the impact on implementability of high and low levels of programme embeddedness

	Positive impact	Negative impact	Zero impact
High	Programme's alignment with other HRM practices Ownership feelings Programme acceptance Programme understandability Programme doability Programme's motivatingness Recognisability Quick transfer to practice of learning outcomes	---	---
Low	No relation, and therefore no interference with daily work. Programme visibility, salience Transfer of programme elements to existing HRM-practices Programme acceptance due to functional contrast with existing practices	Unusability of programme outcomes through conflict with supervisor style Unusability of programme outcomes through problematic transfer to employee's work situation	

Table 2.3. Factors that mediate the impact on implementability of high and low levels of simplicity

	Positive impact	Negative impact	Zero impact
High	Less room for discussion or different expectations Easy to maintain	---	If the program creates a great benefit to the employee, he is more willing to accept a low level of simplicity
Low	--	Employees cant oversee the whole of the programm Implementation takes more time and effort Employees can get frustrated if the program is to complex to work with (negative energy) More communication is needed	

Table 2.4. Factors that mediate the impact on implementability of high and low levels of participative programme development

	Positive impact	Negative impact	Zero impact
High	'Feel good' reactions of those participating in programme development Positive personal relationships resulting from participation in programme development Programme acceptance as a result of participation in programme development	---	Superfluity of participation in case of apparent inherent programme attractiveness
Low	Commitment enhancement of those volunteering in the programme without having participated in the programme development	No commitment stakeholders	

Table 2.5. Factors that mediate the impact on implementability of high and low levels of attention to politics

	Positive impact	Negative impact	Zero impact
High	Willingness of powerholders to provide resources Supportive, committed and cooperative attitude of powerholders Zero threat for powerholders	---	Superfluity of attention to politics in case of apparent absence of conflicting interests Superfluity of attention to politics as far as effective overruling is possible
Low	Safeguarding the autonomy of involved organization members	Conflict with disregarded actor	

Table 2.6. Factors that mediate the impact on implementability of high and low levels of gradual program implementation

	Positive impact	Negative impact	Zero impact
High	It creates ambassadors Gradual exposure makes habituation easier Extensive testperiod makes flawless final introduction possible It creates spreading in use of logistical or financial resources	---	
Low	Programme clarity for participants Clear expectations participants Positive use of momentum Organization shows importance system	---	

Table 2.7. Factors that mediate the impact on implementability of high and low levels of HRM's co-workership

	Positive impact	Negative impact	Zero impact
High	Organization members being released from care for practicalities and technicalities Organization members being enabled to entirely concentrate in programme content Removal of practical constraints Programme being well understood by organization members	---	---
Low	Safeguarding the responsibility of involved organization members	Resistance rooted in frustration	

	Safeguarding the ownership feeling of involved organization members	Delay in process Miscommunication	
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Table 2.8. Factors that mediate the impact on implementability of high and low levels of HRM's accessibility

	Positive impact	Negative impact	Zero impact
High	Smoothness of implementation Momentum maintenance Organization members' commitment Organization members' feeling of being listened to Organization members' feeling of being supported Organization members' feeling of being not alone Organization members' motivation to invest efforts in programme Organization members being encouraged to persist	---	---
Low	---	Then much is depending on the quality of linemanagement	

Table 3.  
Implementability levers, derived from interview outcomes

Hypothesized	Not-hypothesized
Programme adaptability	Attractiveness of programme contents
Programme embeddedness	Suitable timing of programme implementation
Programme simplicity	Programme publicity generated by programme successes
Participative programme development	Input from a diversity of perspectives
Attention to organizational politics	Emotional involvement of managers and employees
Gradualness of programme introduction	Sound planning of programme implementation
HRM- coworkership	Coerciveness of programme implementation
HRM-accessability	