Human Resources: careers and leadership in a diverse context

Research Programme of the Department of M&O,
VU/FEWEB – 2011-2015

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Summary

The research program converges on the relationships between personnel activities and internal human and social capital, with special attention to the intervening individual processes. This relation determines business vitality to a large extent. Research is organized in three interrelated themes, careers, diversity, and leadership. Research examples within these themes are personal and situational career and development factors in and their implications for modern organisations, determinants of the psychological contract for minorities (such as older workers), and structure and consequences of top management selection process.

Introduction

Personnel researchers from economics or business departments of the universities in the Netherlands cooperating within the framework of the Netherlands HRM Network (founded in 1998: EUR, KUN, UT, UVA, UVT, VUA), all focus on determinants of, effects of, and changes in the employment relationship between employee and organization. However, their work differs in the primary disciplinary angle (e.g. economics, sociology, industrial psychology, and engineering) and focus (e.g. level of individual employee, team, department, organization, societal institutions) that researchers use. The research group Human Resources of the VU University Amsterdam is unique in the Dutch academia in that it uses primarily theory and methods of Organizational Behavior to study effects of HRM interventions on individual, team, and organisational behaviors and outcomes. That is, the focus is much less on actually
designing methods of HRM (for instance intended at workplace learning or ‘action learning’), than on understanding its processes and effects using psychological concepts. Compared to research in (work and social) psychology departments, work behavior is studied in the context of real organizations (instead of in laboratory settings), and theories and concepts from other disciplines are also used (e.g., to understand performance management not only psychological theories and concepts, but also economics and management accounting concepts are used). The research group participates in a number of international research networks.

**Objectives**

Personnel management interventions aim to realize strategic HRM goals by controlling internal work performance of employees. The focus of these personnel practices is to create human and social capital as resources for internal work performance. Internal performances such as production and innovation in turn enable the company to produce added value for external customers. The program’s objective is to contribute to explaining how present-days environmental dynamics affect the ways in which professional services’ organizations select, develop, and maintain heterogeneous human resources. One of the key issues here is how, with an increasing diversity of the work force (as a result of an increasing inflow of for instance females, ethnic minorities, and elderly workers) to combine the need for permanent innovation with both the ‘no nonsense’ criterion of delivering results in an efficient way, and the ‘value’ motive of committing employees to customer-involvement and long-term innovation. An important lens to study this is the employees’ careers, which involve individual investments in development and growth on the one hand, and organisations benefiting from these investments on the other hand. Managing personnel consequently relates to taking on appropriate leadership roles with respect to career structure and process.

**Motivation**

The field of personnel management studies has seen significant progress in the past several decades. Longitudinal research into determinants of managerial effectiveness, managerial learning, and career growth underlined the importance of such personal factors as ambition, firmness, interpersonal sensitivity and learning style. Gradually, emphasis has shifted from the relative weight of these personal factors to the impact of situational determinants (e.g. learning opportunities, coaching, and management style) on the long-term dynamics of job performance dimensions (e.g. in-role work performance or organizational citizenship behaviors). In particular, characteristics of the (social) situation in which promotions decisions are made, have become a focus of interest.

Since in most organizations there are fewer jobs and less managerial resources at each consecutive level, there will be increasing competition between candidates. Decision makers tend to base promotion decisions on behavior in social situations such as meetings, presentations, negotiations, and informal contacts “off the job”. Current research of the group deals with such topics as access to such a ‘tournament’ (only for
those visible to decision makers?), attributes necessary for winning (not necessarily the same as for access), and whether the characteristics of the tournament in itself make it more likely for some type of candidates to win than for others (masculine in terms of competitiveness and dominance, so more advantageous for men).

Such structural features of management development seem important especially in later career stages for explaining which personnel activities contribute to the establishment and management of heterogeneous psychological contracts in a heterogeneous work force. Psychological and economic theories are used to understand management of demographic diversity, obstacles to for instance women’s and ethnic minorities’ promotion to management. The traditional safety net of funded early retirement is being withdrawn worldwide. It appears that many workers will not retire before the age of 65. It has therefore become even more important to understand the motivation and learning behaviour of these workers compared to their younger colleagues.

Research into the impact of psychosocial work characteristics on career outcomes revealed i) longitudinal relations between psychosocial work characteristics and mental health, ii) which type(s) of causal relation(s) exist between psychosocial work characteristics and mental health (normal, reversed or reciprocal), iii) which time lag(s) (are) best suited for examining longitudinal relations between psychosocial work characteristics and mental health, and iv) which mechanisms can explain these different causal relations. Following up on these findings, the members of the ‘human resource program group’ currently examine whether activation-related behaviour, determinants and effects of psychological contracts differ as a function of age. Longitudinal data are collected from several service sector companies to examine success factors of company interventions aimed at elderly workers in order to stay successful members of the workforce in greater detail.

**Research Methods**

Theory and methods from the fields of industrial psychology are used to address learning and diversity issues relating to the internal personnel management of organizations. Typical research methods are (longitudinal) surveys, case studies, and field (or quasi-) experiments. Also, personnel statistics on the internal personnel ‘flow’ (e.g. entry assessments, performance ratings, salary level data, and turnover rates) of (large) organizations are used.

**Description of the Programme**

*Theme 1: Careers*

Within this theme, careers are studied as the result of personal drivers (e.g., learning styles, ambition, and basic intelligence), situational opportunities (e.g., developmental job components) and the social context (e.g., managerial coaching). Careers are also studied as “repositories of knowledge” which involve accumulation of information and knowledge embodied in skills, expertise, and relationship networks that are acquired through an evolving
sequence of work experiences over time. Thus, a number of on-going projects study effects of personnel assessment and development activities on work socialization, job performance, and innovation. Emphasis is on the relative weight of personal versus situational (also social) determinants, and on the time-dependent long-term dynamics of job performance. Examples of research questions are which behaviors (e.g. communication, networking, or planning and organizing) are effective during which career stages, and which factors (e.g. learning opportunity or learning style) determine which learning outcome (e.g. skill mastery or work satisfaction) is realized. A set of other project, which focus on the study of careers as repositories of knowledge, examine effects of career resources on new venture performance, growth and learning.

Examples of research projects:
- Validity of two-stage models (absolute selection / arena selection) to understand internal career processes.
- Longitudinal research (3-waves) into effect of introduction of a new career system in a large auditing firm.
- Determinants and effects of a career that is ’boundaryless’ in both a geographical and psychological sense.
- Longitudinal examination of firm cofounders career resources matching in the process of new venture creation.
- Firm founders' pre-entry career capital: accumulation, utilization, and new venture performance.
- “Intelligent” careers as vehicle for organizational learning.

**Theme 2: Diversity**

In this case the question is which personnel activities contribute to the establishment and management of heterogeneous contracts in a heterogeneous work force. Different psychological and economic theories (e.g. social comparison theory, organizational role theory, human capital theory, and rational decision making theory) are used to understand management of demographic diversity, and obstacles to for instance women’s and ethnic minorities’ promotion to management.

Examples of research projects:
- Gender differences in (transformational/transactional) leadership behavior, and in consulting styles
- Success factors of company interventions (for instance programs teaching language, interpersonal competences, and intercultural skills) aimed at immigrant groups in order to become more successful members of the workforce.
- Large-scale multi-sample investigation in health care / cure sector into personal and organizational determinants of (older) workers’ willingness to continue working after formal pension date.
- Rewriting the psychological contract for older workers.
- Work-home interaction, or the possible positive and negative influences between the work and home domains, and their interactions with family-friendly polices (e.g., flexible working times, working from home, childcare) and cultures.
- Diversity in goal orientation: Effects on group processes and performance.
• Work identity in a diverse work environment (with University of Johannesburg)
• Power differences in teams and socialization.

Theme 3: Leadership
The focus on the situational factors in organisations means paying greater attention to leadership and leadership development as one of the important processes determinants of the successful organisational performance, and healthy organisational climate. Here too, we apply a process/dynamic view on the leadership development. The programme addresses questions: How do managers’ success criteria change along the hierarchical ladder in an organisation? How do employees’ social and human capital change depending on the job level? What does it mean to lead ethically, and how can we develop ethical leaders for the future business sustainability? The research results are applied to both academic and practitioner contexts.

Examples of research projects:
• Gender differences in (transformational/transactional) leadership behavior, and in consulting styles.
• Success factors of critical career transitions in managerial careers.
• Longitudinal research into assessment center validity.
• Content, determinants, and consequences of ethical leadership.
• Transactional and transformational leadership and innovative behavior.
• Development of academic talent for sustainability (with University of Pretoria).
• The role of gender in leader successorship.

Last modified on 10 October 2011