

Fifteen Years of Strategic HRM Philosophy in Croatian Companies – has HR Department Evolved Into a Strategic Partner?

Nina Pološki Vokić

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract

Strategic human resource management (SHRM) means accepting the HRM function as a strategic partner, a role popularized by Dave Ulrich in the mid-1990s. His well-known multiple-role HRM model encompassing four HRM roles (administrative expert, employee champion, change agent and strategic partner) is one of the most popular paradigms implying that HRM is a vital contributor to business strategy. A strategic HRM role is considered to be the ultimate stage in the evolution of HRM according to the contemporary theory, focusing on aligning HRM goals, strategies and practices with business strategy in order to achieve organizational goals. The paper explores the pace of transformation of HRM departments in Croatian companies from old “cadre”, personnel departments with influential trade unions present in communist times, towards a strategic role of HRM typical for companies having world-class high performance HRM practices suitable for free market systems. In the theoretical part of the paper SHRM and strategic partner concepts are described, while the empirical part of the paper presents longitudinal data on the presence of strategic HRM role in Croatian companies in the last fifteen years. SHRM indicators for 2001, 2005, 2012 and 2014 collected by the author using representative samples of 500+ employees companies are presented and analyzed. Empirical findings revealed that although the field is firmly advancing, in general, the strategic component of HRM in Croatia is not fully present – HR managers are not always top management members, formal HRM strategies are still not omnipresent, and the relative number of HR professionals in organizations is not adequate for HRM activities to be implemented properly.

Keywords

Strategic human resource management (SHRM), multiple-role HRM model, strategic partner, CRANET, Croatia.

Introduction

The strategic perspective of human resource management (HRM) has grown out of researchers’ desire to demonstrate the contribution that HRM practices make to organizational performance and competitive advantage (e.g. Delery & Doty, 1996; Collins & Clark, 2003), and the application of the adjective ‘strategic’ signals that effective HRM is critical to organizational effectiveness (e.g. Boxall & Purcell, 2000; Jackson, Schuler & Jiang, 2014). A strategic human resource management (SHRM) is considered to be the ultimate stage in the evolu-

tion of HRM according to the contemporary theory. It is focused on aligning HRM goals, strategies and practices with business strategy in order to achieve organizational goals.

SHRM also means accepting the HRM function as a strategic partner, a role popularized by Dave Ulrich in the mid-1990s. His well-known multiple-role HRM model encompassing four HRM roles (administrative expert, employee champion, change agent, and strategic partner) is one of the most popular paradigms implying that HRM could be a vital contributor to business strategy. It is argued that a strategic role is a piv-

otal one for HR professionals in today's organization (Cleland, Pajo & Toulson, 2000), as it enhances the effective utilization of high performance HRM practices, which, in turn, increases financial performance through increased human resources productivity (Mitchell, Obeidat & Bray, 2013).

The paper explores the pace of transformation of HRM departments in Croatian companies from old "cadre", personnel departments with influential trade unions present in communist times, towards a strategic role of HRM typical for companies having world-class high performance HRM practices suitable for free market systems. Namely, in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, a need to move away from mostly administrative towards more strategic and business-oriented HRM has emerged (Zupan & Kaše, 2005).

In the theoretical part of the paper SHRM and strategic partner concepts are described, while the empirical part of the paper presents longitudinal data on the presence of strategic HRM role in Croatian companies in the last fifteen years. Precisely, SHRM indicators for 2001, 2005, 2012 and 2014 collected by the author using representative samples of 500+ employees companies are presented and analyzed.

1. Theoretical background – SHRM and strategic partner concepts

1.1. The strategic human resource management philosophy

SHRM is the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals, which distinguishes itself from traditional HRM as, vertically, it entails the linking of HRM practices with the strategic management process of the organization, and, horizontally, it emphasizes the coordination or congruence among the various HRM practices through a pattern of planned action (Wright & McMahan, 1992). SHRM assumes that effective HRM activities improve organizational performance (Schuler & Jackson, 2005). This has indeed been documented – HRM contributes to organizational performance by improving productivity, financial performance, social outcomes, and reducing turnover (Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Ichniowski, Shaw & Prenzushi, 1997; Patterson, West, Lawthom & Nickell, 1997; Collins & Clark, 2003; Pološki Vokić, 2003; Peterson, 2004).

Table 1 systematizes and specifies five theoretical frameworks in SHRM. The two most assessed in the literature are certainly the universalistic and contingency perspective (e.g. Youndt, Snell, Dean & Lepak, 1996). The first proposes that best HRM practices should be adopted in all companies, while the second implies bringing HRM strategy in line with business needs (Boxall & Purcell, 2000). The configurational perspective, emphasizing the roles of complementarity, congruence, and synergy among HRM practices (Kaufman & Miller, 2011), is the third widely proposed perspective, which completes the three-way typology developed by Delery and Doty in 1996 (Kaufman & Miller, 2011). However, in practice, most SHRM writers make the configurational perspective a component part of the universalistic and contingency perspectives, thus limiting the framework to a two-way typology (Proctor, 2008 after Kaufam & Miller, 2011). The final two perspectives – the contextual and integrative perspective, are not widely elaborated in the literature, as the first is actually a contingency perspective that emphasizes a socio-political context, and the second consolidates all existing perspectives.

Table 1 SHRM perspectives

Perspective	Definition	Main arguments	Influential authors
Universalistic perspective (The 'best-practice' perspective)	Investing in advanced HRM practices increases companies' performance irrespective of context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some HRM practices are always better than others 'Best' HRM practices lead to higher organizational performance regardless of an organization's strategy Organizations that adopt best HRM practices will reap higher profits 	Pfeffer (1994); Pfeffer (1998)
Contingency perspective (The 'best-fit' perspective)	Designing HRM strategy to fit critical contingencies in the firm's specific context (achieving a 'unique fit')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All HRM practices are not cost-effective across all sector or across all types of labor (even in a single firm) The effectiveness of individual HRM practice is contingent on firm strategy An organization that adopts HRM practices appropriate for its strategy will be more effective HRM practices are chosen so they best align with contingency factors such as organizational size, industry, business strategy, production technology, workforce characteristics, job skills, legal regimes, political regimes, labor market, 	Schuler & Jackson (1987); Baird & Meshoulam (1988)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> and sociocultural influences Both external/vertical fit (HRM activities must fit the organization's stage of development), and internal/horizontal fit (the need to ensure that individual HRM policies fit with and support each other) needed 	
Configurational perspective	Focusing on patterns of HRM practices that together form an internally consistent whole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A configuration of a set of internally aligned HRM practices (the system of HRM) will have a much greater impact on organizational performance than single HRM practices taken in isolation Explains how systems, clusters or bundles of HRM practices are mutually reinforcing and interact with each other to have synergistic outcomes at the organizational level The performance effect of HRM practices depends on assembling the right combination or system of practices such that all the separate HRM elements fit together, support each other, and develop the maximum attainable synergy ('horizontal fit' – the effectiveness of any one practice depends on its fit or misfit of it with other elements of the HRM system) Bundles of HRM practices (most often termed high performance work systems – HPWS) are associated with important organizational outcomes 	Doty & Glick (1994); Huselid (1995); MacDuffie (1995); Ichniowski, Shaw & Prenzushi (1997); Becker & Huselid (1998); Delery (1998)
Contextual perspective	Adapting HRM practices to fit different national-level cultural, social, political, and legal contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encompasses the particularities of geographic, macroeconomic, industrial and social factors First introduced by scholars outside the United States 	Brewster (1999); Martin-Alcazar, Romero-Fernandez & Gardey (2005)
Integrative perspective	Synthesis and integration of other perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a core of 'best practice' HRM techniques and policies (typically associated with HPWS), which in most to nearly all organizations results in improved performance, and the rest has to be contingent/contextual, as well as configurational 	Boselie, Dietz & Boon (2005); Becker & Huselid (2006)

Source: compiled using Schuler & Jackson, 1987; Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Pfeffer, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Delery & Doty, 1996; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Pfeffer, 1998; Boxall & Purcell, 2000; Colbert, 2004; Wright, Snell & Dyer, 2005; Lepak & Shaw, 2008; Kaufman & Miller, 2011; Marler, 2012

This paper supports the integrative perspective, with SHRM considered to be a universal part of it. In other words, as SHRM explicitly links people management policies and practices to the achievement of organizational outcomes and performance, most particularly financial and market outcomes (Kramar, 2013), it should be the HRM philosophy in every organization.

1.2. HRM as a strategic partner

One of the first to introduce a strategic partner role of HR professionals was Dave Ulrich. He wrote about an entirely new role and agenda for the field that focuses not on traditional HRM activities, but on outcomes, which is not defined by what it does but by what it delivers – results that enrich the organization's value to customers, investors, and employees (Ulrich, 1998a). He named it a 'strategic partner' role, and it was one of the four major HRM roles he recommended in mid-1990s – employee champion, administrative expert, change agent, and strategic partner (Ulrich, 1997). In mid-2000s, together with Brockbank, he expanded the typology and proposed five major roles – employee advocate, human capital developer, functional expert, strategic partner, and leader, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2 HRM roles and their evolution

HRM roles	Mid-1990s	Mid-2000s		Evolution of thinking
	Definition	HRM roles	Definition	
Employee champion	Charged with understanding the needs of employees and ensuring that those needs are met	Employee advocate	Charged with making sure the employer-employee relationship is one of reciprocal value	Employees are increasingly critical to success of organizations. Employee advocate focuses on today's employee. Human capital developer focuses on how employees prepare for the future.
	Charged with personally spending time with employees, and training and encouraging managers in other departments to do the same	Human capital developer	Charged with building the future workforce	
Administrative expert	Charged with ferreting out unnecessary costs, improving efficiency, and constantly finding new ways to do things better	Functional expert	Charged with designing and delivering HRM practices that ensure individual ability and create organization capability	HRM practices are central to HR value. Some HRM practices are delivered through administrative efficiency (such as technology), and others through policies, menus, and interventions, expanding the "functional expert" role.

Change agent	Charged with fording or facilitating a dialogue about values as they identify new behaviours that will help to keep a firm competitive over time	Strategic partner	Charged with helping line managers at all levels reach their goals	Being a strategic partner has multiple dimensions: business expert, change agent, knowledge manager, and consultant. Being a change agent represents only part of the strategic partner role.
Strategic partner	Charged with designing HRM practices that align with business strategy Participating in the process of defining business strategy	Strategic partner	As above	As above
		Leader	Charged with tying it all together Being credible both within HRM functions and to those outside	The sum of the first four roles equals leadership, but being an HRM leader also has implications for leading the HRM function, collaborating with other functions, ensuring corporate governance, and monitoring the HR community.

Source: compiled using Ulrich, 1997 and Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005

As strategic partners, HR professionals focus on execution of strategy by aligning HRM systems to help accomplish the organization vision and mission (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). They focus on the achievement of organizational goals by aligning HRM goals, strategies and practices with business objectives and implementation of business strategy (Conner & Ulrich, 1996; Andersen, Cooper & Zhu, 2007).

In practice, HR professionals that are strategic partners have ‘a seat at the table’ when business decisions are made (Jackson, Schuler & Jiang, 2014). They are members of the management team with a deep expertise in people and organization, but with enough business savvy to help shape future business directions (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Ideally, the strategic partner role incorporates HR department as a full participant in both the development and operationalization of organizational strategies (Dessler, Griffiths, and Lloyd-Walker, 2007 after Mitchell, Obeidat & Bray, 2013) – in both strategy formulation and strategy implementation (DeCieri et al., 2008 after Mitchell, Obeidat & Bray, 2013).

Yet, becoming a strategic partner means an entirely new role for HR experts – they may have to

acquire new skills and capabilities (Ulrich, 1998a). To play the strategic partner role effectively, they must master the theory and practice of forming and implementing strategy – they must be able to engage managers in discussions of vision, values, purpose, and intent (Ulrich, 1998b).

2. Methodology

Sample. As it has been identified that HRM practices in Croatia exist within organizations with more than 500 employees (Pološki Vokić & Vidović, 2008), data for 500+ organizations from four surveys have been used for the assessment of SHRM progress in Croatia: (1) 2001 HRM survey conducted by Pološki Vokić (more in Pološki Vokić, 2004), (2) 2006 HRM survey conducted by Pološki Vokić and Vidović (more in Pološki Vokić & Vidović, 2007), (3) 2012 HRM survey conducted by CRANET team Croatia beyond the official CRANET survey round (more in Pološki Vokić, 2012), and (4) 2014 HRM survey conducted by CRANET team Croatia in the official CRANET survey round (more in Pološki Vokić, Klindžić & Hernaus, 2015). All four samples are representative, as around a quarter of 500+ population participated in first three survey rounds, and almost a half of population in the last survey round (see Table 1). Organizations from 500 to 1000 employees, and private sector organizations are over-sampled, which corresponds with the Croatian large-sized organizations’ population, and implies no response bias.

Table 3 Samples’ profiles

Indicator		Survey rounds			
		2001	2006	2012	2014
Number of organizations in the sample		41	36	38	77
% of the population (responsiveness)		27.0	24.2	22.0	43.3
Organization size (% in the category)	500 to 1000 employees	53.7	54.3	44.8	50.6
	1000 to 1500 employees	12.2	17.1	10.5	18.2
	1500 to 2000 employees	9.7	5.7	10.5	10.4
	more than 2000 employees	24.4	22.9	34.2	20.8
Sector (% in the category)	private	63.4	63.9	78.9	80.5
	public	36.6	36.1	21.1	19.5

Source: author

Instruments. Typical quantitative and qualitative HRM indicators were collected in 2001 and 2006 through a highly-structured questionnaire

developed using HRM literature, while 2012 and 2014 surveys used CRANET methodology (CRANET, 2009). Both instruments collected data about the HR department position in a company, various HRM practices (such as job design, recruitment and selection, performance management, compensations and benefits, labour relations, etc.), and HR manager’s characteristics, among which as well SHRM indicators analyzed in this paper.

Data analysis. For the purpose of this paper, seven SHRM indicators were extracted from the above-mentioned surveys. Six out of seven indicators were not identical considering response values, and therefore had to be recoded, while one indicator (number of HR professionals compared to the total number of employees) was computed for all cases using identical inputs. Data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 23 by using descriptive statistics to calculate relative frequencies and mean values, and by using inferential statistics to test the existence of significant differences in SHRM indicators among four time points (non-parametric hi-square and Kruskal-Wallis H tests used depending on the type of variable).

3. Results

Results for the seven SHRM indicators analyzed are presented in Table 4. The first thing the table indicates is that the strategic impact of HRM in 500+ Croatian organizations improved considerably in the last fifteen years. At the beginning of 2000s only around a third of organizations had HR departments, and people responsible for HRM placed on top management levels. As well, only around the quarter of organizations had a written HR department mission statement and written HRM strategy, as well as evaluated the performance of HR department in order to assess the department’s contribution to organizational performance. Compared to that, in mid-2010s almost all 500+ Croatian organizations have HR departments that participate in strategic planning, and regularly evaluate HR departments’ performance. As well, one of the indicators implies a longitudinal advancement in the strategic role of HR department – the percentage of organizations where HR department participates in strategic planning constantly increased since 2001. Almost the same applies for the percentage of organizations where the person responsible for HRM has a place on the top executive team, as this indicator raised continually with the exception of 2006.

Table 4 SHRM in Croatia in 2001, 2006, 2012 and 2014

SHRM indicator	Survey rounds				Statistical differences	
	2001	2006	2012	2014	χ^2/H -value	p
[1] % of organizations with HR departments	39.0	91.7	81.6	92.2	50.587	0.000
[2] % of organizations where the person responsible for HRM has a place on the board or equivalent top executive team	39.0	11.8	57.1	66.2	30.192	0.000
[3] % of organizations where HR department participates in strategic planning	61.0	79.4	83.8	93.5	17.292	0.001
[4] % of organizations that have a written HR department mission statement	24.4	46.9	-	-	4.035	0.045
[5] % of organizations that have a written HRM strategy	22.0	-	92.1	67.6	43.164	0.000
[6] % of organizations where the performance of HR department is evaluated	26.8	34.3	97.4	84.0	70.246	0.000
[7] % of employees employed in the HR department out of a total number of employees	0.87 min = 0.16 max = 2.48	0.89 min = -0.30 max = 2.72	0.84 min = 0.02 max = 2.72	0.69 min = 0.15 max = 3.58	4.062	0.255

Source: author

However, another thing that could be observed from the table is the impact of the economic crisis still present in Croatia (the crisis induced by the 2008 global financial crisis). Namely, one indicator was better in 2006 than in 2012 (% of organizations with HR departments), one indicator was better in 2006 than in 2010s (% or employees in HR department compared to the total number of employees), and two indicators (% or organizations that have a written HRM strategy, and % or organizations where the performance of HR department is evaluated) were better at the beginning of 2010s than in 2014.

Nevertheless, the inferential statistics revealed that the role of HRM in 500+ organizations in Croatia is more strategic than at the beginning of the 21st century. Five SHRM indicators (No. 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6) are statistically significantly better in 2010s, and one indicator (No. 4) implies the statistically significant improvement in mid-2000s.

Discussion and conclusion

Empirical findings revealed that the HRM field is firmly advancing in Croatia. A clear shift towards SHRM model, as in other CEE countries (e.g. Kohont & Poór, 2011; Kohont, Svetlik & Bogičević Milikić, 2015) is evident. For example, as around the world (see Wright, Moore & Stewart, 2012 after Jackson, Schuler & Jiang, 2014), the presence of HR experts in top management teams has improved over time. As well as in many CEE countries (e.g. Karoliny, Farkas & Poór, 2009), the level of involvement of the HR department in strategic planning is getting close to best practices. Finally, the fact that more and more organizations have written HRM strategies suggests that the architecture of the HRM function is becoming a strategically important one.

However, although the SHRM philosophy is increasingly being accepted, in general, the strategic component of HRM in 500+ organizations in Croatia is not fully present – HR managers are not always top management members (one third of organizations do not provide them with that opportunity), formal HRM strategies are still not omnipresent (one third of organizations do not have written HRM strategies), and the relative number of HR professionals in organizations is not adequate for HRM activities to be implemented properly (Croatian 500+ organizations are on average far from the 1% benchmark).

Furthermore, the impact of economic crisis should not be ignored. The global financial crisis impacted activities of managing people in Croatian organizations seriously (Pološki Vokić, Klindžić & Hernaus, 2015), which is reflected in SHRM indicators as well.

Altogether, although historically HR professionals spend more time on administrative HRM, especially those in CEE countries (e.g. Zupan & Kaše, 2005; Bogičević Milikić, Janićijević & Petković, 2008), they should be aware that as strategic partners they play a major role in creating strategic unity (Ulrich, 1998b). This paper advocates that to be strategic partners, HR professionals should attend the process of strategy development (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005), which should especially be a concern of Croatian HR experts that are still not integrated in organizational strategic endeavours. Even though the HR strategic role has implications on the adoption of innovative high performance HRM and, through this, financial performance (Mitchell, Obeidat & Bray, 2013), the strategic HRM philosophy is not present all over 500+ Croatian organizations. Many

HR departments in Croatia have not yet evolved into strategic partners, and they do not have the opportunity to demonstrate that HRM strategic inputs boost organizational outcomes. **SM**

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✉ Correspondence

Nina Pološki Vokić

Faculty of Economics and Business

Trg J. F. Kennedyja 6, 10000, Zagreb, Croatia

E-mail: npoloski@efzg.hr