A TOPIC OF BROAD INTEREST

The field of electronic HRM and Human Resource Information Systems (HRISs) has developed very rapidly over recent years. Already, more than twenty years have passed since the publication of DeSanctis’s (1986) seminal work on HRISs, and the topic continues to command the attention of scholars and practitioners around the world. If anything, interest in this topic has been increasing, as evidenced by citation counts, international academic workshops dedicated to this topic and a number of special issues of international journals. In line with this trend, and responding to a perceived need to advance our understanding and theoretical grounds in this field, this special issue is a timely contribution.

Throughout the first two decades of e-HRM research, an initial body of empirical findings and distinct conceptual propositions have appeared. We attribute our knowledge about types of e-HRM applications, positive and negative consequences of e-HRM implementations, assumptions about various architectural compositions of IT-based HRM channels, different popularity of e-HRM tools and business-driven promises (goals) of e-HRM to this research period. However, e-HRM research to date has been scattered throughout numerous journals, has concentrated on several distinct focal points and remains patchy (Strohmeier, 2007).

This special issue with seven articles aims to facilitate the transition of e-HRM research from its infancy stage, of gathering scattered knowledge, towards a more ‘grown-up’ and mature stage. To achieve this, this issue sets out to:

- Deliver a state-of-the-art overview of e-HRM theoretical developments.
- Address methodological issues in e-HRM research.
- Identify future cutting-edge research directions.

There are undoubtedly many reasons for the intense interest in the topic of electronic HRM. These interests shape the main debating points within e-HRM research which we see as fitting within three broad categories:

- theoretical backgrounds and use of theories in e-HRM research
- methodological rigour
a new phase of the practical relevance of e-HRM research.

**Key Theoretical Approaches in e-HRM Research**

Research in e-HRM is associated closely with various fields of management research. E-HRM research is connected with innovation management studies such as those looking at socio-technical innovation (Allen, 2000; Prescott & Conger, 1995; Ryan & Harrison, 2000), innovative HRM (De Leede & Looise, 2005; Shipton et al., 2005) and innovation implementations (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2008; Klein & Sorra, 1996), which are themselves areas seeing significant research activity. As in the field of innovation management, e-HRM research focuses not only on the products and technologies (applications for HRM practices) but also on the process of e-HRM innovation. Further, e-HRM research has strong ties with the broad field of Information Technology implementations: end-user satisfaction, data quality, acceptance and success of IT (Davis, 1989; Delone & McLean, 2003; Venkatesh, 2000). In contrast to the IT implementation studies, e-HRM research seeks to uncover the idiosyncratic role of the application domain, i.e. HRM practices, in the complex process of integrating e-HRM into organisational life. Clearly also, e-HRM research adheres to Human Resource Management by considering the impact of e-HRM on the HR function and on the distribution of the HR responsibilities (Lepak & Snell, 1998; Farndale et al., 2009) and the strategic advantages of HRM (Marler, 2009; Paauwe, 2009).

Thus, the e-HRM field is fed and complicated by three academic research domains: studies oriented towards social and technical innovations, towards IT implementations and, finally, ‘pure’ HRM studies. While innovation studies tend to integrate social and technical issues, we see clear distinctions between IT and HRM contributions. The IT-centric studies usually investigate the use of IT for HR purposes and tend to focus on the growing sophistication of technology and the qualities necessary for its adoption. Such studies usually cover topics such as IT acceptance, resistance, effectiveness, equality, information security and privacy in the context of e-HRM technology usage. However, they remain silent about changes in HR practices resulting from e-HRM. HR-based e-HRM studies, on the other hand, generally only examine single e-HR practices, and focus on the changes in HR processes and functions that follow automation. These studies tend to avoid issues related to implementation and ongoing use of IT.

As the breadth of these topics suggests, the opportunities to advance e-HRM research come from a range of directions. Accordingly, scholars with a variety of research interests, foci, expertise, disciplinary training and methodological leanings have become involved in e-HRM research. The broad interests and scope of e-HRM do not impose limitations on its study as such. However, its multidimensional orientation and background calls for a clear overview of the diverse theoretical concepts and methodological approaches used in and recommended for e-HRM research.

**Methodological Rigour of e-HRM Research**

In terms of domain questions, e-HRM research has been trying to deal with the question of how to define e-HRM. Since a clear definition has been missing, many researchers have introduced different descriptions (for an overview, see Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009). Therefore, we start with the definition of e-HRM that was accepted by the e-HRM researchers present at two e-HRM conferences (a ‘consensual definition’), where we agreed to define e-HRM as:

“An umbrella term covering all possible integration mechanisms and contents between HRM and Information Technologies aiming at creating value within and across organizations for targeted employees and management” (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009, p. 507).
In this definition, we emphasise four aspects: the content of e-HRM (any type of HR practices that can be supported with IT), the implementation of e-HRM (the process of adoption and appropriation of e-HRM by organisational members), targeted employees and managers and, fourthly, e-HRM consequences. Further, we have assembled a vocabulary of useful terms for e-HRM research that we present at the end of this Introduction.

In terms of epistemological issues, e-HRM research has been largely dominated by positivist studies and, as a result, methods affiliated with this paradigm have been considered appropriate for theory or model building. However, this special issue shows fresh approaches when researchers break away from this dominant paradigm. There are articles in this special issue dealing with the e-HRM field that question its positivist fundamentals in theory building and propose new routes and ways of looking at e-HRM.

Practical Relevance of e-HRM Research

So far, practice has expected e-HRM research to validate the promised benefits, such as a strategic reorientation of the HR function, cost reductions and HRM service improvement. Indeed, many overviews exist that have tried to illustrate the value of e-HRM. While we acknowledge the relevance of such studies, we think that organisations now accept the findings of such overviews, and are looking ahead to a new wave of e-HRM research. Therefore, we propose to take a further step. One possibility is to orient e-HRM studies towards a new generation of employees. We should recognise that a new generation, born between 1982 and 2003, will be entering the labour market and will be anticipating new methods in Human Resource Management. This generation has already been labelled as the millennium generation, the virtual generation or the Net generation (Strauss & Howe, 2000; Proserpio & Gioia, 2007; Alsop, 2008). It is important to recognise that most of this generation grew up with information technology and that the Internet was part of their teenage years. This generation is used to information technology and social networks, the web is no longer a take-it-or-leave-it issue, and this has consequences for how they expect human resource services to be delivered. That means that e-HRM has to be a driving force and a major provider of future HR services. E-HRM is becoming a ‘vehicle’ for new ways of managing a new generation.

AN OUTLINE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue consists of four articles. The first article, by Furtmueller, Wilderom and van Dick, explores how to motivate applicants to keep their profiles up-to-date and stay connected with one specific recruiting portal throughout their careers. For their study the authors interviewed applicants; system analysts; and programmers of a nationwide (Austrian) e-recruiting portal. Narratives showing striking differences between these three stakeholders’ interpretation of system requirements for long-term usage are discussed. The identified requirements in this study point to niche recruiting: integrating social network and community features for specified user segments sharing a similar social identity and fostering pre-existing offline ties among users for career purposes. Implications are sketched for more sustainable e-recruiting research, design and development.

The second article, by Guilloux, Laval and Kalika present results from a longitudinal exploratory study on the diffusion of e-HRM practices in French firms. One of the study’s theoretical bases is the configurative approach; others being the strategic alignment-theory and the concept of technological infusion. Strategic alignment between human resource management and an HR intranet, as well as technological infusion, appear to be important if one is to achieve the expected results. Based
on the study’s results, the authors theorise that a configurative approach allows one to integrate additional variables and could therefore result in a mature, systemic model.

The third article, by Fallery, Ologeanu-Taddei, and Gerbaix explores the acceptance and appropriation of videoconferencing-mediated training, which has become a tool for e-HRM during the past decade. The authors observe that virtual class, or desktop videoconferencing, and remote class, distant class room-based learning by a video-conference-based remote trainer, are the main types of videoconferencing for training. They set up an empirical study in order to find out the effects of video-conferencing on user acceptance and appropriation, the latter concept taken Adaptive Structuration Theory. The results show that learners in the virtual class report higher satisfaction and higher intention to continue using video-conferencing than learners in remote class. Interestingly, this seems to contrast with Daft’s Media-Richness Theory, however the authors assume that this result can be explained as virtual class offers more operational gains to learners and that it appears to be more innovative.

The final, article, by Guechtouli, explores HR Management issues in Environmental Scanning (ES) processes through the concept of “intelligent filters”. The paper provides an understanding of how human attention can be managed for selecting strategic information in a complex environment.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We believe that the articles that comprise this special issue reveal some of the major conceptual and methodological tensions, paradoxes and doubts that the e-HRM research field currently demonstrates. Nevertheless, we also see good cause for strong optimism as it shows the way towards the next phase of e-HRM research development. The articles lead us to the conclusion that e-HRM research is in a transformational stage and is now moving towards crystallising its theoretical backgrounds, broadening its methodological approaches, and meeting the needs of real-life e-HRM projects.

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REFERENCES


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