Chapter 17

Routines as a Perspective for HR–Professionals: Diversity as a Driver for Routines

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how organizational behaviour is rooted in routines and habits. Using insights from sociology and cognitive psychology, the authors develop a framework which addresses the influence of the broader environment on organizational behaviour, including societal and generational developments, over time is discussed. The chapter argues that these broader environmental developments exert a greater influence on organizational behaviour than many managers and HR-professionals realize. To assist these professionals, the authors present three insights offering them a further understanding of organizational behaviour and how this may be affected by HR policies.

INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions of organizations, and there are even more theories. Some thinkers focus on organizations as institutions (e.g., Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Campbell, 2007), whereas others focus on a complex of networks that extends beyond the organizational context (e.g., Thompson, 2003). There are theorists who see organizations as ecological and evolutionary systems (Blomme, 2012; Blomme, 2014) with self-sufficiency and continuation at the centre, or as political systems driven by power, influence and vested interest (Morgan, 1997). Others see them as cognitive systems based on interpretation and sense-making (e.g., Daft & Weick, 1984). And there are still other schools of thought that regard organizations as chaotic and complex phenomena (e.g., Stacey, 2006; Blomme, 2012). In short, there is a whole plethora of perspectives. Although these approaches differ in their views on organizations, all of them are founded on the same premise, namely that individuals form an important part of any organization.
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and are responsible for the way in which that organization works, not just internally but also in relation to the outside world. People not only form part of an organization through their presence, but they also construct and give shape to that organization through their behaviour, bound by organizational contexts.

In the field of organizational research, a main focus lies on developing a clearer understanding and acquiring more knowledge about the behaviour of individuals in organizational contexts and about the way in which it evolves. A term that is frequently found in this context is ‘collective behaviour’, which was first coined by Park (1927). He postulated that the relationship between the social and physical environment affects individual behaviour and in turn individual behaviour affects behaviour of individuals belonging to that social environment. Collective behaviour results from the mutual influences exerted by individual behaviours that lead to individual behaviours, which strongly resemble one another. Whatever way you see it, collective behaviours are founded on individual behaviour. At the core of what we call ‘organizational behaviour’ lies the accumulation and convergence of all the individual actions and behaviours that form collective behaviour in organizational contexts; these actions and behaviours are iterative and demonstrate clear patterns. This premise is supported in the literature by the attention for organizational routines and the role of human behaviour in these routines (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Over the years, this perspective has become increasingly popular (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Feldman, 2000), and it deviates from the more commonly accepted business and economic perspectives on routines, which suggests that routines are formal and rational instruments providing a structure and rule-setting for organizational members (cf. Nelson & Winter, 1982; Becker, 2004; Felin & Foss, 2009). Routines are iterative and recognizable patterns of dependent behaviours, demonstrated by various actors, which are of fundamental importance for the execution of tasks within organizational contexts and which include skills as well as knowledge (Rerup & Feldman, 2011). This description also indicates the importance of the concept of ‘routine’ in organizational research and in the initiation of change. Changes in routines lead to different behaviour, to different duties and thus to organizational changes. We could assume that a more thorough understanding of the origin of routines and the way in which these routines evolve would contribute to a better insight into organizations and henceforth, into the effectiveness of HRM policies and its execution.

In this chapter, we shall argue why the perspective of routines may offer valuable new insights, not only with regards to our understanding of organizations but also with regards to more practical terms for the benefit of HRM-professionals and managers. We shall start by exploring the concept of ‘routines’ and we shall argue that routines are based on behaviour demonstrated by individuals operating within an organizational context. Inspired by ideas formulated by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we will show how individual habits are influenced by collective routines to which individual behaviours, in turn, make additional contributions. That said, one should also bear in mind that individual behaviour is not determined solely by these collective systems, but also by its own uniqueness and the adoption of habits that are unique to the individual. We shall also elaborate on the crucial role played by individual schemata with respect to habits – and thus with respect to routines. With the concept of ‘schemata’, we shall argue that organizational routines – and therefore behaviour – can only be truly understood when we also specifically consider external contexts including the generation effect, thus avoiding an exclusive focus on internal contexts only. We shall end this article by offering a number of conclusions that are relevant for researchers and practitioners operating in the field.