



## STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### *Article History:*

Received 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2017  
Received in revised form  
12<sup>th</sup> October, 2017  
Accepted 09<sup>th</sup> November, 2017  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2017

#### *Key Words:*

Strategic HRM,  
Performance,  
Competence,  
Firm Size,  
Technology.

### ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this paper is to present a review of literature on theories and empirical studies on the relationship between Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and organizational performance and derive a framework for further research. Three central issues emerged in this paper. First, that a growing body of evidence converge to suggest that changes taking place in the global business environment often are not accompanied by complementary changes in human resource management practices leading to a situation whereby the failure of some firms is due to the mismanagement of people rather than to problems with technical systems per se. Secondly, that this is because organizations have achieved relatively low levels effectiveness in implementing Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices especially in emerging economies of Asia and other developing countries in Africa like Nigeria that are exposed to the challenges and opportunities of globalization. Finally that in order to manage employees for competitive edge, human resource personnel must possess competencies relevant for implementing such strategic HRM policies and practices. Guided by theoretical perspectives such as the firm's resource-based theory of competitive advantage and empirical studies, this paper develops a research framework to guide further research in strategic HRM to prepare organizations especially in the developing world for the challenges of globalization.

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**Citation:** Dr. Muhammad Aminu Bawa, 2017. "Strategic human resource management and organizational performance: A review of literature and research framework", *International Journal of Development Research*, 7, (12), 18036-18042.

## INTRODUCTION

A great deal of evidence has accrued to suggest that changes taking place in the global business environment often are not accompanied by complementary changes in human resource management practices leading to a situation whereby the failure of some firms is due to the mismanagement of people rather than to problems with technical systems per se (Bawa and Ali, 1999). This is because organizations have achieved relatively low levels of effectiveness in implementing Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices (Huselid, Jackson and Randall, 1997). This is particularly the case in developing countries like Nigeria that are exposed to the challenges and opportunities of globalization. In spite of this, attention of researchers to the challenges of globalization has been focused, more, on macroeconomic aspects and there is

relatively less on the role of human resources. Secondly, the issue of globalization has been addressed predominantly in, and with respect to, the developed economies of Western Europe, North America and Japan. This paper is an attempt to address these two limitations since the human factor is one of the key issues in the new era of globalization (Bawa and Ali, 1999; Hassan, 1992; Sims and Sims, 1995). The primary objective of this paper is to conduct a literature review on the role of strategic HRM on organizational performance in a competitive business environment and to develop a research framework in order to advance empirical studies in the field. Following Wright and McMahan's (1999) comprehensive theoretical framework for Strategic HRM, this paper develops a research framework for Strategic HRM to prepare organizations for the challenges of globalization. The rest of the paper is divided into three sections. The next section presents a review of conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature on the subject matter under study. Section three

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summarizes the literature and develops research framework and the last section concludes the paper.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualizing Strategic HRM

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) involve a set of internally consistent policies and practices designed and implemented to ensure that a firm's human capital (employees) contribute to the achievement of its business objectives (Delery and Doty, 1996; Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Jackson and Schuler, 1995). Schuler (1992: 18) has developed a more comprehensive academic definition of SHRM: "Strategic human resources management is largely about integration and adaptation. Its concern is to ensure that: (1) human resources (HR) management is fully integrated with the strategy and the strategic needs of the firm; (2) HR policies cohere both across policy areas and across hierarchies; and (3) HR practices are adjusted, accepted, and used by line managers and employees as part of their everyday work". For Wright and McMahan (1999), SHRM refers to the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals. Some of the frequently cited fundamental elements of SHRM in the literature includes the view that Strategic HRM practices are macro-oriented, proactive and long term focused in nature; views human resources as assets or investments not expenses; implementation of Strategic HRM practices bears linkage to organizational performance; and focuses on the alignment of human resources with firm strategy as a means of gaining competitive advantage (Khatri, 1999).

### Theoretical Foundations of Strategic HRM

Several theoretical perspectives have been developed to organize knowledge of how HR practices are impacted by strategic considerations. For example, Wright & McMahan (1999) developed a comprehensive framework on theoretical influences on HR practices. Four of these influences provide explanations for practices resulting from strategy considerations. These include the resource-based view of the firm, behavioural view, the cybernetic system and the transaction cost view. The two other theories provide explanations for HR practices that are not driven by strategy considerations; they are the resource dependence and institutional theories. The resource-based theory of the firm blends concepts from organizational economics and strategic management (Barney, 1991). This theory holds that a firm's resources are key determinants of its competitive advantage. Firms can develop this competitive advantage only by creating value in a way that is difficult for competitors to imitate. Traditional sources of competitive advantage such as financial and natural resources, technology and economies of scale can be used to create value. However, the resource-based argument is that these sources are increasingly accessible and easy to imitate by other organizations. Thus they are less significant for competitive advantage especially in comparison to a complex social structure such as an employment system. If that is so, human resource policies and practices may be an especially important source of sustained competitive advantage (Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994). Specifically, four empirical indicators of the potential of firm resources to generate competitive advantage are: value, rareness, imitability and substitutability (Barney (1991). In other words, to gain

competitive advantage, the resources available to competing firms must be variable among competitors and these resources must be rare (not easily obtained). Three types of resources associated with organizations are (a) physical (plant; technology and equipment; geographic location), (b) human (employees' experience and knowledge), and (c) organizational (structure, systems for planning, monitoring, and controlling activities; social relations within the organization and between the organization and external constituencies). HR practices greatly influence an organization's human and organizational resources and so can be used to gain competitive advantages (Schuler and MacMillan, 1984).

The second theoretical influence is the behavioral view based on contingency theory. This view explains practices designed to control and influence attitudes and behaviors, and stresses the instrumentality of such practices in achieving strategic objectives. The third influence, based on transaction costs explains why organizations use control systems such as performance evaluation and reward systems. The argument is that in the absence of performance evaluation systems linked to reward systems, strategies might not be pursued (Greer, 1995: 107-8).

### Combining the arguments from the three theories above, two issues become obvious

In the first place, HRM practices are adopted because of three specific social forces, factors or influences. First, constraining forces, which shift as practices once viewed as negative become interpreted positively and gain legitimacy. Second, cloning forces which pressurize firms to mimic the actions of leading companies in the face of uncertainty and third, learning forces which are shaped through processes in educational institutions and professional associations (McKinley, Sanchez and Schick, 1995; Thompson and Heron, 2005, cited in Ibrahim & Shah, 2013: 6). Secondly, this exposition provides a more complete perspective on how researchers and managers can make HR decisions that ultimately affect the extent of implementing strategic HR practices for positive firm level outcomes. Accordingly, researchers have tried to define and guide empirical research and HR practices as to which practices are considered strategic in nature. Delery and Doty (1996) identified seven practices that are consistently considered strategic HR practices. These are internal career opportunity, formal training systems, appraisal measures, profit sharing, employment security, voice mechanisms and job definition. There are other Strategic HRM practices that might affect organizational performance. For example, Schuler & Jackson (1987) presented a very comprehensive list of HR practices. However, the seven practices listed by Delery and Doty above appear to have the greatest support across a diverse literature. For example, nearly all of these are also among Pfeffer's (1994) 16 most effective practices for managing people.

An obvious question at this juncture is: How can organizations effectively adopt, implement and maximize strategic HRM practices for valued firm level outcomes? That is, how can firms increase the probability that they will adopt and then effectively implement appropriate HR practices? Ensuring that members of the HRM personnel have the appropriate human capital or competencies has been suggested as one way to increase the likelihood of effective implementation of HRM practices (Huselid, *et al.*, 1997). What are these core

competencies? Ulrich and Yeung (1989) argue that HR professionals will need four basic competencies to become partners in the strategic management process. These include business competence, professional and technical knowledge, integration competence and ability to manage change. On the other hand, the United Kingdom-based Management Charter Initiative (MCI), an independent competence-based management development organization, identifies seven key roles and required competencies. These include competencies required to manage roles like managing activities, managing resources, managing people, managing information, managing energy, managing quality and managing projects (MCI Management Standards, April, 1997). Finally, Huselid *et al* (1997) identified two sets of HR personnel competencies as important for HR personnel: (1) HR professional competencies and (2) Business-related competencies. This paper focuses only on these two core competences. Human Resource professional competence describes the state-of-the-art HR knowledge, expertise and skill relevant for performing excellently within a traditional HR functional department such as recruitment and selection, training, compensation, etc. This competence ensures that technical HR knowledge is both present and used within a firm (Huselid *et al.*, 1997). Business-related competence refers to the amount of business experience HR personnel have had outside the functional HR specialty. These capabilities should facilitate the selection and implementation of HRM policies and practices that fit the unique characteristics of a firm including its size, strategy, structure, and culture (Jackson & Schuler, 1995). In other words, these competencies will enable the HR staff to know the company's business and understand the ever changing economic and financial capabilities necessary for making logical decisions that support the company's strategic plan based on the most accurate information possible.

### Empirical Studies

Human resource practices (HR practices) are the primary means by which firms can influence and shape the skills, attitudes, and behavior of individuals to do their work and thus achieve organizational goals (Collins and Clark, 2003, cited in Ibrahim & Shah, 2013: 8). An important issue at this juncture is how to conceptualize the path through which the implementation Strategic HRM practices can lead to better organizational performance. Guest (1997, cited in Ibrahim & Shah, 2013: 8) provides a detailed suggestion in this regard positing that the commitment and flexibility provided by highly involving actions leads to behavioural changes among employees because employees show high levels of motivation, co-operation and citizenship, thereby adopted better performing behaviors, leading to lower absenteeism and turnover rates, as well as better productivity and quality. These behaviors are associated with undesirable social results like turnover, conflicts and absenteeism and organizational results such as productivity, quality of goods and services and customer complaints. According to Guerrero and Barraud-Didier (2004, cited in Ibrahim and Shah, 2013: 8), these types of performance were supposed to affect financial performance. Empirical studies accumulate to posit that greater use of Strategic HRM practices will always result in better organizational performance (Abowd, 1990; Gerhart and Milkovich, 1990; Huselid, 1995; Terpstra and Rozell, 1993). Abowd (1990) found that the degree to which managerial compensation was based on an organization's financial performance was significantly related to future financial

performance. Similarly, Leonard (1990) found that organizations having long-term incentive plans for their executives had larger increases in return on equity (ROE) over a four-year period than did other organizations. Gerhart and Milkovich (1990) found that pay mix was related to financial performance. That is organizations with pay plans that included a greater amount of performance contingent pay achieved superior financial performance. In combination, these studies indicate that organizations with stronger pay-for-performance norms achieved better long-term financial performance than did organizations with weaker pay-for-performance norms.

In another study, Terpstra and Rozell (1993) posited five "best" staffing practices and found that the use of these practices had a moderate and positive relationship with organizational performance. Huselid (1995) identified a link between organization-level outcomes and groups of high performance work practices. Instead of focusing on a single practice (e.g., staffing), Huselid assessed the simultaneous use of multiple sophisticated HR practices and concluded that the HR sophistication of an organization was significantly related to high sales turnover, organizational productivity and financial performance. Ayanda and Sani (2010) examined the effect of strategic HRM practices on the effectiveness of public sector organizations on a sample of 255 civil servants cutting across thirty Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) in Niger state, North Central Nigeria. Using correlation and multiple regression analysis, the results indicate that strategic HRM is moderately practiced and found that strategic human resource management was aligned with overall government objectives. Finally, the researchers also found that line management development; training and development, compensation, career planning system and employee participation are the most important strategic HRM practices that impacted more on organizational effectiveness in the public sector. Ayanda and Sani (2011) conducted another study examining the extent to which strategic HRM is practiced in the Nigerian manufacturing sector as well as its impact on organizational performance. Using a multi-respondent survey of 21 Nigerian manufacturing companies the results show that strategic HRM was moderately practiced by the companies. Results also indicate that line management development, innovative recruitment and selection system, regular training and development of personnel, equity based compensation system, performance appraisal system, effective career planning system and a robust employee participation in the organizations' decisions and actions are the key strategic HR practices that influence organizational performance.

In another study, Ugheoke, Isa and Noor (2014) investigated the impact of strategic HRM on tangible firm performance using data from a sample of 250 SMEs in Lagos, South Western Nigeria. Using multiple regression analysis, the result shows that strategic HRM has a significant positive influence on tangible performance. Michie and Sheehan (2005) in their survey of 362 firms from both manufacturing and service sectors in the United Kingdom found that Strategic HR practices significantly contributed to all the performance measures used. In another study using 120 Spanish manufacturing firms, Rodriguez and Ventura (2003), found that the implementation of a "make" HR system has a significant and positive effect on the organization's overall performance and this leads to the enhancement of the employees' commitment to the firm. Another study was

conducted by Khatri (2000) using 222 firms in Singapore and found that high performance HR practices have marginal direct effect on sales and non-financial performance. Similarly, Wan, Ong and Kok (2000) in a study consisting of 191 firms in Singapore found that high performance work practices were positively related to firm performance. In the case of requisite Strategic HR competences, evidence from empirical research demonstrates the increasing need for HR personnel to have both HR professional and business-related skills and competences. Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright (2010) conducted a survey of HR executives in the US showed that HR managers are spending relatively less time in record keeping and auditing, while their time spent in their activities as business partners have doubled. The survey also revealed that HR managers believe that the most important skill needs of HR staff are team skills, consultation skills and understanding of business.

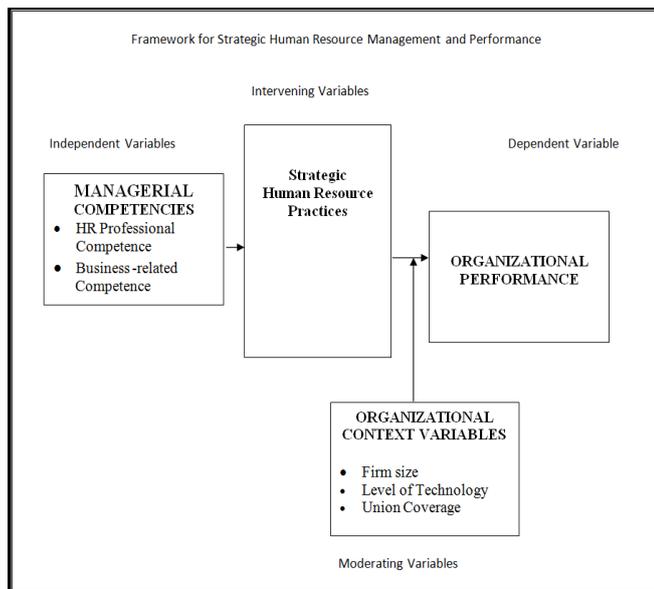
Research has also shown that managerial competences particularly in the HR function bring two advantages to the HR function: (1) Enhancing the status of the HR Department (Barney and Wright, 1988) and (2) Acting as important influences on the level of integration between HR management and organization strategy (Golden and Ramanujam, 1985; Ropo, 1993). A study of Singaporean companies by Khatri (1999) found that when HR managers lack the necessary skills to perform their duties competently, line managers and executives take over some of the functions of HR managers. Research on managerial competences by Ropo (1993:51) stressed that "the internal dynamism of the HR function serves as the most critical mechanism to keep the integration process going after it has been started under favorable organizational and strategic circumstances". Other studies show that if HR managers can evaluate their priorities and acquire new sets of professional and personal competences, the HR function would be able to ride the wave of business evolution proudly with other functions in the organization (Ulrich, Brockbank, Yeung and Lake, 1995).

Suryaningtyas and Asna (2017) conducted a study to identify and describe the strategic roles of human resource managers in a hospitality industry using data from three-star hotels in Malang, Indonesia and interviewed six human resource managers as participants in a qualitative method employing semi-structured interview. The results show that the strategic roles of human resource managers contribute in anticipating competitive business challenges; contribute in creating competitive advantage; and also that human resource were central in creating the competitive advantage for the company. An elaborate study by Huselid *et al.* (1997) on 293 firms in the US to evaluate the impact of human resource managers' professional/technical competencies on HR practices and the latter's impact on organizational performance. Results of the study suggest that consistent with the resource-based view of the firm, there exist a significant relationship between Strategic HRM practices and organizational performance. They found that (1) HR related competencies and, to a lesser extent, business-related competencies increase the extent of effective implementation of SHRM practices and (2) consistent with studies linking HRM activities and firm performance (Huselid, 1995; Huselid and Becker, 1996), the study support the argument that investments in human resources are potential sources of competitive advantage. Owing to the increasing importance of HR practices to the

competitive advantages of firms in the rapidly changing knowledge-based economy, some scholars have paid attentions to examine the determinants of the adoption of HR practices (Tannenbaum and Dupree Bruno, 1994, cited in Bahrami, *et al.*, 2013) or what some researchers refer to as organization's context variables (Ali and Bawa, 1999; Irwin, Hoffman and Geiger, 1998; Jackson and Schuler, 1995). These factors include firm size, technological sophistication and union coverage. Bawa, Jantan and Ali (1999) argue that the influence of firm size on HR practices is well documented in theoretical and empirical studies. For example, institutional theory suggests that larger organizations should adopt more sophisticated and socially responsive HR practices because they are more visible and are under more pressure to gain legitimacy. However, economic considerations suggest that because of the costs associated with many aspects of HRM, acceptable economies of scale must be reached before sophisticated HRM systems can be implemented. An empirical study conducted by Ibrahim and Shah (2013) on 121 manufacturing firms in the electrical and electronic sector in Malaysia discovered that among the three organizational context variables investigated, only firm size showed significant difference in firms' decision to adopt strategic HRM practices. As these researchers argue, larger firms could have more complete and sophisticated human resource systems compared to small firms, as large firms need to spread out their cost, higher level of control and image consciousness due to their higher visibility in society. In addition, emerging evidences show that HR practices may differ in organizations depending on the level of technological sophistication in terms of training (Majchrzak, 1988), performance appraisal (Snell, 1992) and reward systems (Snell and Dean, 1992). Studies also support the position that the presence of specific HRM practices may differ based on the union coverage of a firm (Ali and Bawa, 1999; Ng and Maki, 1993, Wagar, 1998; Lawler and Mohrman 1987).

## RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

From the literature review so far, the following issues emerge. First, that there appears to be a significant relationship between strategic HRM practices and firm performance (low employee turnover, high productivity and high profitability (Bawa, Jantan and Ali, 2000; Ibrahim and Shah, 2013; Huselid *et al.*, 1997). Secondly, it is also clear that there exist low incidence of implementing strategic HRM practices (Huselid *et al.*, 1997; Wright and McMahan, 1992). Thirdly, although there exists a significant relationship between the extent of both HR professional and business-related managerial competencies and the incidence of implementing HRM practices, organizations have achieved higher levels of HR professional competencies relative to business-related competencies. Finally, environmental context variables like firm size, technology and union status affect the extent of implementing HRM practices (Ali and Bawa, 1999; Bawa, Jantan and Ali, 2000; Ibrahim and Shah, 2013; Jackson and Schuler, 1995; Snell and Dean, 1992; Wagar, 1998). The relationships discussed above are presented in a research framework (see Fig. 1 below) and relevant propositions derived for future research. This research framework is in keeping with the thinking of a number of authors including Bawa and Jantan, 2000, Delery and Doty (1996), Huselid, *et al.* (1997), Jackson and Schuler (1995) and Wright & McMahan (1992).



Source: Designed by Author

**Fig. 1. Research framework on Strategic HRM and Performance**

The following testable propositions are derived from the framework above.

1. Human resource managers have achieved higher levels of HR professional competencies and lower levels of business related competencies
2. The incidence of implementing strategic HR practices is lower in organizations especially in the developing countries of Asia and Africa.
3. Both HR professional competence and knowledge of the business (business related competence) significantly contribute to the extent of implementing strategic HR Practices
4. Managerial competencies are significantly related to organizational performance.
5. The extent of implementing SHRM practices contribute significantly to organizational performance.
6. The extent of implementing is affected by organizational context variables (firm size, level of technology and union coverage), among others.

It may be pertinent to point out here that the six propositions derived from the framework are particularly relevant for giving insights into the HRM challenges facing organizations. In other words, these propositions will help us organize thought on the level of readiness (and otherwise) of organizations in response to the challenges of the global business environment. For example, if HR personnel especially in developing countries demonstrates higher levels of HR professional competence relative to the business-related competence (as found in the literature), it would be important to set right this wrong as a stepping stone for succeeding in global business. This is because to succeed in the new era of globalization, the human factor is central. That is why it is necessary for HR personnel to prove themselves beyond reasonable doubt that they are capable of playing key roles in enhancing the status of the HR department (Barney and Wright, 1988), must possess a thorough understanding of business (Noe *et al.*, 1997) and also act as important influences in the level of integration between HR management and organizational strategy (Bahrami, *et al.*, 2013; Golden and Ramanujam, 1985; Ropo, 1993).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is pertinent to point out issues raised in the preceding sections of this paper are particularly relevant for giving insights into the strategic HRM challenges facing organizations especially in developing countries like Nigeria in the new era of globalization. In other words, these issues will help us organize thoughts on the level of preparedness of organizations in implementing strategic HRM practices to achieve higher organizational performance. This is only possible if they have the requisite competence to play key roles in enhancing the status of the HR Departments and also act as important influences in the level of integration between HR practices and organizational strategy.

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