Aligning Human Resource Management to Knowledge Management within the UK Management Consulting Sector

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the alignment between human resource management (HRM) and knowledge management (KM). The research was motivated by the increasing trend towards highlighting the role of HRM practices in supporting KM and its activities. Effective and efficient KM is claimed to only be possible if firms address its human dimension in addition to its information technology (IT) one.

The review of relevant literature showed that there was a lack of sufficient empirical research to support the theoretical claims linking HRM to KM. Available empirical studies are rare and subject to criticism that question the validity of the studies. Two empirical research questions are adopted for this study:

(1) *How is KM perceived and implemented within the management consulting sector in the UK?*
(2) *What is the role of HRM in supporting KM within the management consulting sector in the UK?*

The context of this study is the management consulting sector in the UK. This sector was thought optimal for uncovering links between HRM and KM, mainly due to the nature of this sector; it is arguably knowledge-intensive and is a major employer of a highly skilled workforce.

The study utilised mixed methods to address the research questions, which were investigated in both an intensive and an extensive manner. Several methods were utilised as well to ensure replication, complementation and triangulation. The first method is a descriptive survey to assess extensively HRM, KM and their interrelations in the UK management consulting sector. A total of 52 participants replied to the survey, out of a sample of 323 organisations, achieving a response rate of 16.1%. The second method comprises semi-structured qualitative interviews covering a representative sample of the survey sample. A total of 15 interviews were conducted at this research stage. The third method includes two mini case studies that were chosen based on the companies having a developed KM initiatives and HRM practices. A total of five interviews were conducted; several relevant documents were also collected from each of the two organisations.

The thesis generated several major findings that impact on the relevant literature. There is little evidence of formal holistic KM initiatives in the management consulting sector. KM is chiefly addressed through IT management. At the informal level, KM is viewed as a set of activities where the most cited activity is knowledge-sharing. Therefore, this study found that research is more useful, if it focuses on where knowledge resides and what are the contextual characteristics under each KM orientation.

The study identified four KM strategies that organisations might adopt. The combination strategy is found to be the most adopted by consultancies followed by the codification, personalisation and *laissez faire* strategies. The study focused on the following contextual characteristics under each strategy: culture type, leadership style, IT, knowledge types, knowledge sources, KM responsibility and dominant KM activities. Each KM strategy has a distinctive set of contextual characteristics.

Afterwards, the HRM function was found to have a limited role in supporting KM – and when some roles are claimed, they are identified as indirect and reactive. As for the HRM practices, practitioners viewed them as natural contributors to KM at various intensities, although they have not designed them with the intention to do so. Above all, participants perceived PA, R&S and T&D as significant contributors to KM. The thesis then moves on to allocate the contextual characteristics of the HRM practices under each KM strategy, which further illustrates the implicit role of those practices in supporting KM.

The case studies have added some depth to our understanding of this research branch. Firstly, they highlighted the internal politics and power struggles caused by introducing KM initiatives. Secondly, they illustrated how various KM strategies exist within the same organisation.