



Introduction

Ashish Malik

Human Resource Management in Context

There are several learnings one can assimilate by studying how changes and differences in an organisation's macro-economic, legal, political, social, cultural and technological context has an impact on managing people, or what we commonly refer to as human resource management and employment relations (HRM & ER). A major case in point from the twenty-first century is the catastrophic impacts of the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) on managing people in the organisations directly affected by it. Recent research on the topic suggests that in a post-GFC era, multiple HRM approaches were adopted by firms even within one industry (Malik 2013) and in different industry and national contexts (Malik 2017). Some have argued that most of the responses in dealing with the pressures imposed by the GFC had led to long-term negative impacts on employees, wherein these impacts can be largely explained by neoliberal orientation of people who were responsible for causing this crisis (Bolton and Houlihan 2007; Marchington and Kynighou 2012). The approach taken by this book is to embed learning using theoretical insights balanced with learning from case studies from different contexts. I believe a case-based approach is critical in providing insights in applied disciplines such as HRM and ER to allow the learner to engage in higher order learning skills. To this end, this chapter begins with an overview of the case-based approach to learning, highlighting the conditions where such an approach is most effective. The skills of a facilitator of learning are also acknowledged as important in bringing the most out of the specific cases.

A. Malik (✉)

Faculty of Business and Law, Central Coast Business School, The University of Newcastle,
Ourimbah, Central Coast, NSW, Australia
e-mail: ashish.malik@newcastle.edu.au

© Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2018

A. Malik (ed.), *Strategic Human Resource Management and Employment Relations*, Springer Texts in Business and Economics,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0399-9_1

A Case-Based Approach to Learning Strategic HRM and ER

The use of case studies in teaching has historically been prevalent in Law schools, however, a number of applied disciplines such as business studies, medicine and education have since adopted the use of case studies in their teaching (Merseth 1991). The case-based teaching method though popularised by the Harvard Business and Law school is now used as a common pedagogical (or rather an andragogical) approach in most business programs. There are a number of prescriptions in the way this approach has evolved and how this should be applied to different geographical settings to accommodate the contextual demands of a given program or unit. Implementing a pure “Harvard style” participant-centered learning (PCL) approach using case studies is not always possible or practicable in all contexts because of the contextual factors such as class size, cohort characteristics, resources and other institutional and curriculum-based constraints that often come into play. A variation to the theme is not only necessary but also a pragmatic choice to suit the contextual factors.

Applications of Case Studies

Case studies are typically used to develop students’ higher order learning skills of analysis, synthesis, problem-solving and decision-making. This is often done using limited, messy, and sometimes even conflicting information in a case to arrive at a conclusion. One of the key advantages of case-based teaching is that it is useful in developing insights of broader principles for dealing with a given problem, using specific scenarios and facts from ‘real life’ organisations. A case study without an issue, problem, rule-based analysis or key decision to be resolved does not serve any real purpose from an educational and learning standpoint (Ellet 2007). A well-developed teaching case study is different from a short, end-of-chapter caselet or a half-a-page textbook case, as these latter categories often have little or too simplistic information and generally do not advance multiple skills for higher order learning. This does not mean that short cases should not be used. They have a place and are illustrative. Short cases are also good to embed in adopting this pedagogical approach before learners are introduced to longer and more complex cases. They can and do develop relevant skills as per above, though to a limited extent. A good case study should have enough detail for the learner to make an informed decision but at the same time it should not be too long or easy and straightforward that the learner loses interest because of the limited challenge or excessive information that it offers. A good case study must provide a hook to engage the learner to continue to read and provides sufficient information to undertake problem-solving, analysis and evaluation or, as the case may direct, but without making obvious, what the conclusions are (Ellet 2007).

As noted above, there are many issues to keep in mind before choosing the use of case-based teaching. Briefly these include:

- *Level of the course*- typically well-developed cases work better in post-graduate courses or in the final year courses of undergraduate degrees.
- *Curriculum goals of the unit/program*- the learning goals of a course must support the need for higher order learning, failing which, there might be issues of (mis-)alignment to be dealt with.
- *Culture of case-based teaching at the institution*- this is an important consideration for instructors to bear in mind, especially if there is little or no culture of use of case studies at an institution. In such scenarios, case-based teaching is unlikely to deliver best results. The suggested path is to gradually introduce its application at a program level and have shorter and easier cases in the early stages of the program.
- *Profile of learners*-an understanding of the profile of the adult learners is vital as these profiles vary in each cohort. Typically, a same case can be taught differently to two very dissimilar (with no work experience versus extensive work experience) cohorts of students. The discussion leadership skills, for each cohort required of the facilitator of learning, is vital in striking the right balance. Highly experienced cohort of learners can bring in their depth and breadth of learning for solving the same problem, than learners with little or no experience.
- *Formative versus summative assessment of cases*- it is a good idea to have a balance of formative and summative cases in a course as the former serves as a dry run for what is in store. The former also builds skills and confidence for use of cases across a program or in a unit. Use of case studies in summative assessments is known to increase the learner's motivation. It is also recommended that there be a balance in terms of the mix of cases in a course. For example, the number of summative cases in a module and their levels of complexity. Ideally, the learning should progress from simple to more complex cases, however, this may not be necessary if there is already an established culture of case-based learning at the institution.

Undertaking Case Analysis

Deciding on the adoption of case-based teaching is a key decision and its implementation needs careful consideration. Depending on the purpose of adopting this pedagogical approach, which is usually driven by a course's requirements, its implementation can be adapted to suit the specific learning requirements of a course. As such, this may mean that the skills of the learners, facilitators and assessment strategies will need to be developed accordingly. There are number of commonly used resources available to learners regarding 'how to' analyse cases. Thinking clearly what is the stated or implied in the learning from a given case and its ordering by the instructor can set the tone really well. On a first reading of the case, the reader must identify and develop a description of the common situations and occurrences in a case study (e.g. problems, decisions, evaluations, rules etc) keeping in mind that there are many ways of dealing with each situation. Additionally, in analysing the case, attempts should be made to (1) characterise the situation or task at

hand; (2) note the key tasks/questions to be answered, while keeping in mind that there may not necessarily be a single right answer to the posed question. Common tasks and situations in a case include: problem-solving, decision-making, evaluation, rules application and so on. These require undertaking hypothesis generation or problem identification, establishing a decision criteria, evaluation, building a chain of evidence, developing actionable plans and reviewing possible alternatives to the original hypothesis (Ellet 2007: p.28).

Leading the Case Discussion

This is perhaps the most challenging part of the overall approach as its success depends on a number of institutional factors and skills of the learner and facilitator. Implementing case-based learning is not easy especially if there is no established culture of case-based teaching in an institution. Additionally, depending on the intended use of the case study, the facilitator can create an expansive or a restrictive learning experience for the participants. The key guiding principles in most case-based approaches are: preparedness of the learner and the facilitator, participation by all in the class discussions (at an individual and where necessary, by design, at collaborative levels), having patience and avoid jumping to conclusions too prematurely, fostering collaborative discussions and developing an appreciation that there may not always be a single right answer. Such assumptions will facilitate free flow of information, improve listening skills, allows participant contributions and maintain a balance of opposing and sometimes competing views. It goes without saying that such an approach requires facilitator and learners' attention to micro skills of questioning and responding. The facilitator must also restrain from over participation and must not be biased or prompted by extensive self-participation. Keeping in mind the content covered in Part I and Part II of the book, Part III offers several long case studies from the real world organisations focusing on a range of HRM & ER. Although Parts I and II have a few end-of-chapter cases, the cases in Part III of the book presents an opportunity for learners to explore in greater detail the applied, complex and diverse nature of the field. Christensen and Raynor's (2003) account of why hard-nosed managers should care of management theory in practice is a good read to get convinced of the value-add such an approach might offer.

Overview of the Book

The rest of the book is structured as follows. Chapter “[HRM and ER: A Strategic Perspective](#)” begins by explaining the key terms of strategy, HRM and strategic HR. It begins by highlighting that the study of strategic management offers numerous conceptualizations of the term *strategy* and that the study of strategic human resource management and employment relations (SHRM & ER) must seek differentiation and adopt a pluralist approach. This chapter places heavy emphasis on

developing a contextual understanding of how people management, strategy and context interact to shape the multiple goals of SHRM&ER.

Chapter “[Strategic HRM & ER: Best-Practice Versus Best Fit](#)” builds on the strategic management processes introduced in Chapter “[HRM and ER: A Strategic Perspective](#)”. In this chapter, a firm’s competitive environment is analysed. Managers make informed choices with regard to the nature and extent of their work and employment practices in line with a firm’s competitive positioning. The choices that managers exercise in the design and implementation of HR practices need to be grounded in a firm’s strategic business environment. While this may sound logical, but there are some schools of thought, such as the best-practice school, which offer a much more prescriptive view. In contrast to the best-practice school, the best-fit school adopts an ‘it depends’ or a contingency-based approach. The best-fit approach has a number of variants outlining a range of contingency factors on which the design and implementation of HR practices depend. This chapter considers each of these two approaches and its popular variants and its impact on SHRM and ER theory and practice.

Chapter “[SHRM & ER: The Resource-Based View](#)” shifts the discussion from an ‘outside-in’ approach to strategy and HRM to an inside-out approach through the theoretical lens of the resource-based view of the firm (Barney 1991). In this approach, a firm’s resources and capabilities form the centre of attention in deciding how firms achieve sustained competitive advantage. Employing the VRIO (valuable, rare, inimitable and organisation) framework, this chapter discusses not just which capabilities matter most, but also how organisations can develop capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable and organized in a way that prevents other firms from shaving away the value it has created.

Chapter “[Institutional Theory and SHRM](#)” provides an overview of institutional theory and how it applies to the study and practice of SHRM &ER. This chapter explores in detail the contextual environment of a firm with a particular emphasis on the impact of institutional mechanisms in shaping the nature and extent of SHRM practices in an organization. Having explored the major contributors of SHRM schools of thought, this chapter offers a theoretical analysis of institutional theory. Boselie (2010) suggests that firms are affected by a number of circumstances –internal and external to its environment and that is what creates its unique context. In short, Boselie (2010) notes that a firm’s internal context, which includes aspects such as its history, socio-technical systems, structure and set of administrative policies that govern its daily workings. The unique ways of conducting its business or its cultural influences is also considered. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) noted two aspects of an organisation’s external context. Based on Pauwee (2004) and Boselie (2010: 23), they noted: “a firm’s market mechanisms and institutional mechanisms collectively shape its external context.” This chapter explores how, through human agency, strategic choices and degree of leeway can be changed and challenged through active and passive developmental approaches to bring about differentiation through HRM & ER practices.

Building on the above idea of strategic choices, Chapter “[Strategic Choices Theory and SHRM & ER](#)” explores through the lens of strategic choice theory, how

managers implement HRM & ER strategies in a given institutional environment. The key theoretical insights from strategic choice theory are used to analyse the pluralist nature of ER strategies and how choice making occurs in organisations. This chapter highlights that there are several stakeholders that influence choice. We mustn't forget that strategy is not just the exclusive domain of management; even unions have strategies that can have a profound impact in shaping the nature of employment relationships and a range of employment outcomes. A strategic approach to employment relations (ER) describes a pluralist approach taken by managers, which is a longer-term, more thoughtful and consistent approach to the management of its workforce and employment relationships. In other words, ER strategy for managers in business, public sector and most other types of organisations is that part of a firm's strategy that is related to industrial/employment/employee relations. Depending on the context, it may be a subset of an organization's HR strategy, or separate to and in some cases may even dominate the HR strategy. While this may sound highly analytical, its development and implementation is also fraught with challenges. Also in this chapter, as part of a firm's growth strategies of which internationalization, mergers and acquisitions (M&A) or some form of network of inter-organisational collaboration, we look at how these forms may impact on a firm's international HRM (IHRM) practices. The chapter highlights the differences between an IHRM approach as compared to domestic HRM. M&A as a strategic choice option and its impact in a cross-border context is briefly examined in this chapter.

Chapter "[SHRM & ER: Professionalism and Ethics](#)" examines whether a core set of HR competencies are necessary for HR practitioners to successfully design and implement HR policy and practice choices. The literature on this topic shares significant overlaps with the nature of key HR roles and competencies required by HR professionals in a number of countries. This module examines some of these dominant professional HRM and ER competency models. Related to professional competencies is the adherence to a set of ethical standards and professional code of conduct that HR practitioners and managers must demonstrate in their day-to-day decisions about managing people. This chapter highlights the challenges associated with the ethical dilemmas that HR practitioners are confronted with in dealing with the differences in their personal, professional and organizational values and ethical frames.

Chapter "[Work Design and HR Planning: A Strategic Perspective](#)" highlights the importance and limits of operational and strategic approaches to HR planning. Following a careful and strategic approach to HR planning, organisations must focus on the design and implementation of work systems that allow firms to manage the duality of organisational flexibility on one hand and employee commitment on the other. Maintaining a strategic approach to HR planning, this chapter also explores strategic issues in recruitment and selection of employees and considers what happens to HRM practices when some firms adopt an internal versus an external orientation to attract and select people.

Chapter "[Strategic Performance and Commitment Management](#)" focuses on an important but controversial theme of relationship between performance (at an

individual or systems level) and HR practices. While there are several guidelines for motivating people and groups for achieving high performance in an organisational setting, the literature on this topic is voluminous due to the multifaceted nature of performance. At a micro (individual) level performance, there is an established body of literature which highlights the importance of ability, motivation and opportunity enhancing factors as key predictors of high levels of individual performance. Boxall and Purcell (2011), for example, remind us of the classic performance rubric [$P = f(AMO)$], wherein ‘A’ or ability, ‘M’, motivation and ‘O’, opportunity are vital factors in understanding how ability and motivation increases an individual’s performance. Line managers and supervisors play an important part in providing the ‘opportunity’ for their staff to willingly apply their skills in the workplace environment. At a systems or group level, managing performance requires a much more sophisticated approach given the multitude of ‘system-level’ internal and external factors that come into play. In this latter stream of research, several models of high performance and high involvement work systems of HRM practices have been proposed in the literature. Some of these approaches assume the guise of universalistic prescriptions while others fall under best-fit and other strategic HRM&ER approaches.

Chapter “[Strategic Learning and Development](#)” focuses on a key aspect of an individual’s performance—the ability of employees. The role learning and skill development play in building individual, organisational and dynamic capabilities is examined here. Beginning with the theoretical foundations of why firms invest in individual-level training, the chapter explores the theoretical foundations of the human capital and neo-human capital theories. At an organisational systems level, studies of high performance work practices (HPWPs) also highlight the importance of training and a presence of a learning culture in improving the performance of organisational processes and outputs. The RBV approach also highlights the importance of investing in certain types of skills, resources and capabilities that align with its VRIO prescriptions in order to generate value and deliver high performance. Other theoretical influences are also covered in this chapter focus on how HRD connects with organisational performance. Finally, a brief discussion on retaining talent through career planning and employee counselling is also offered.

Chapter “[Managing Employee Voice](#)” looks at the ‘O’ in the AMO framework by reviewing the emerging terrain of direct and indirect forms of employee voice in dealing with routine and strategic work-related decisions (Boxall and Purcell 2011). From a strategic HRM & ER perspective, moving the discussion on an either or approach to employee voice—i.e. direct or indirect voice—this chapter focuses on the extent to which employees have the space for a *genuine* say over the decisions that affect their conditions of work. Employees’ and managers’ ability to influence and bring about positive change, a key HRM competency covered in Chapter “[SHRM & ER: Professionalism and Ethics](#)” is further examined in the next chapter.

Chapter “[Strategic HRM & ER and Managing Change](#)” looks at all three aspects of the AMO framework in dealing with one of the most important HRM functions—managing change. Despite change being a natural process, why do most

organisational change management initiatives fail is the focus of discussion of this chapter. Building on the extensive work undertaken by Nilakant and Ramnarayan, this chapter presents a framework for understanding and managing the key tasks of change and highlights the role of HRM in successfully managing and supporting change. Nilakant and Ramnarayan's framework of four common tasks of change and what an HR champion must do to successfully design and execute change is covered here. Finally, attendant to the topic of managing change, and taking a holistic and systems level view of development as an outcome of change, this chapter briefly touches upon the importance of organisational development interventions in implementing change.

Chapter "[Strategic Compensation and Benefits Management](#)" focuses on the 'M' or motivation in the AMO framework. HR managers, in determining the nature and extent of rewards and benefits must determine the basis for designing and implementing schemes for motivating employees. Although compensation and benefits are significant HRM practices but to deliver on these practices from a strategic HRM perspective, there are several key considerations. These include: the wider organisational context, the operant business model of the firm as well as some intra-firm dependencies such as culture, style and orientation of senior leaders towards the employees as well as the strategic goals of the firm. It is for this reason that compensation and benefits are considered a controversial and contested function. As such, HR practitioners should balance numerous tensions of equity and equality in administering pay and benefits. The decisions surrounding pay and benefits often trigger emotions of perceived inequity, injustice, nepotism and invokes power and political behaviour in organisations.

Chapter "[Special Topics in SHRM & ER](#)" the final chapter deals with some topical issues and trends in the field of strategic HRM. This chapter focuses on developments in the wider meso-level environment that causes firms to explore new ways of working. In times of such change, the HR practitioner has to perform a balancing act and at times, restore the lost faith and credibility of the function. This is especially true in times of change and organisational crisis. To this end, a selection of the topical issues will be explored in brief. Analysing the relationship between innovation and SHRM&ER relationship focusing especially on work, product, process and business model innovations and how these might transform business and individual outcomes, is briefly covered in this chapter. A discussion of the related concept of organisational ambidexterity (OA) and its relationship with HRM and innovation outcomes, wherein the ability to firms to manage the duality of simultaneously balancing exploration and exploitation of learning for growth is also provided. Increasing interest in Public Sector HRM provides an overview of how the neoliberal pressures in public service are increasingly challenging public service motivation ethos and the desire of public service people to commit their careers to this important part of society. What are the key pressures leadership in the public service is facing in managing what has essentially been a professional bureaucracy will be explored. This chapter also deals with the emerging topic of Green HRM, employee well-being and HR offshoring. Despite the growing importance of HRM& ER function in organisations, there has been an increasing offshoring and outsourcing of a

number of routine and non-routine HR functions. What might be the cause and can this replace local and context-specific delivery that HR & ER offers is also explored. Poor employee well-being, its incidence, causes and how it affects the credibility of HR is explored in this concluding chapter.

Conclusion

The range of topics covered in the book will be a constant source of challenge and engage the learners to achieve higher order learning. The narrative is deliberately kept brief to allow learners to engage with the literature independently as well as based on their interest in a particular topic. Through this book, it is hoped that the reader and participants in the case discussions will appreciate why context and choices matter and the important role human agency plays in the design and implementation of SHRM&ER practices in shaping performance and achieving a balance with the goals of social legitimacy and welfare.

Bibliography

- Barney, J. B. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99–120.
- Bolton, S. C., & Houlihan, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Searching for the human in human resource management: Theory, practice and workplace contexts*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boxall, P., & Purcell, J. (2011). *Strategy and human resource management*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boselie, P. (2010). *Strategic human resource management: A balanced approach*. Berkshire: McGraw Hill Higher Education.
- Christensen, C., & Raynor, M. (2003). Why hard-nosed executives should care about management theory. *Harvard Business Review*, 81(9, September), 66–75.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ellet, W. (2007). *The case study handbook: How to read, discuss and write persuasively about cases*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Malik, A. (2013). Post-GFC people management challenges: A study of India's information technology sector. *Asia Pacific Business Review*, 19(2), 230–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602381.2013.767638>.
- Malik, A. (2017). *Human Resource Management and the Global Financial Crisis: Evidence from India's IT/BPO industry*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1039/c7sc04083k>.
- Marchington, M., & Kynighou, A. (2012). The dynamics of employee involvement and participation during turbulent times. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 23(16), 3336–3354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2012.689161>.
- Merseth, K. K. (1991). The early history of case-based instruction: Insights for teacher education today. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(4), 243–249.
- Paauwe, J. (2004). *HRM and performance: Achieving long-term viability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.