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Other Organizational Perspectives on the Contribution of Human Resources Management to Organizational Performance

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1 Introduction

Human resources management (HRM) has been an object of study and reflection at both theoretical and practical levels. In fact, it is common to find references in the literature to a dichotomy of analysis and perceptions between academics and practitioners (Gates & Langevin, 2010; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Winkler et al., 2013). The considerable intensification of research in this field is a consequence of diverse debates which emerged around the concept and object of HRM (Legge, 1995; Kaufman, 2001; Gates & Langevin, 2010). Among these debates are questions such as: the transverseness attributed to HRM in the organizational field (Paawe, 1996; Keating et al., 2000; Ribeiro, 2003; Cunha et al., 2010); and the connection between HRM and organizational performance (Wright et al., 2005; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Stavrou et al., 2010; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013; Bednall et al., 2014).

After the 1980s, and particularly after the 1990s, HRM came to be regarded as fundamental to the development of an organization and to the sustained growth of the business (Guest, 1987, 1997; Legge, 1995; Storey, 1992, 2007; Ulrich, 1997a,b; Brewster, 1993a,b; Paauwe, 1996; Cabral-Cardoso, 1999, 2004; Keating et al., 2000; Sirca et al., 2013; Bednall et al., 2014). HRM becomes strategic when it emphasizes the relevance of considering persons as an organizational asset requiring investment and appropriate management (Jamrog & Overholt, 2004; Bourne et al., 2013), i.e., when HRM starts to manage persons according

to the specificities of the business, therefore adding value to the business and contributing to the organization's distinctiveness and competitive character (Porter, 1985, 1990; Peters & Waterman, 1987; Schuler & Jackson, 1987, 1997; Dyer, 1984a,b; Kaufman, 2001; Cabral-Cardoso, 2004; Jamrog & Overholt, 2004; Azmi, 2011; Bourne et al., 2013). There is, however, a long way to go, both at academic and practical levels, to accomplish a greater consistency, credibility and acceptance of the role of HRM in the strategy of the organization (Legge, 1995; Pfeffer, 1995, 1998; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999; Kaufman, 2001; Caldwell, 2002; Cabral-Cardoso, 2004; Cunha et al., 2010; Stravou et al., 2010; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013; Bednall et al., 2014).

The systemic nature of organizations requires an understanding of the multiple meanings of each organizational actor as a member of specific organizational and professional groups/subgroups, of their functions, roles, responsibilities, and professional expectations (Sozcka et al., 1981; Luthans, 1988; Romelaer, 1996; Sculion & Starkey, 2000; Lemmergaard, 2009; Long et al., 2013; Amin et al., 2014). Therefore, this study is positioned from the perspective of the internal client, to understand how different organizational actors perceive the reality of HRM with an emphasis on characterizing and understanding their perceptions of the contribution of HRM and HR managers to the performance of the organization.

This chapter is part of a broader study developed by Ribeiro (2014) and makes use of data collected within that research project. Accordingly, the qualitative empirical study is based on 257 interviews with different organizational actors with distinct hierarchical levels and organizational functions, belonging to ten companies active in Portugal. The analysis of the empirical data is developed through the methodology of grounded theory.

The chapter is so structured that the evolution of HRM is presented in Section 2. This is followed by a definition of the scope of HRM in Section 3 with a description of the main roles performed by HRM in Section 4. Section 5 analyzes the expectations of HRM and the HR department; this is followed by the debate on the contributions of HRM to organizational performance in Section 6. Sections 7 and 8 present the methodology applied in the empirical study, showing the paradigm adopted, the methods for data collection and analysis, the description of the interviewees and procedures in conducting the research. Section 9 provides the interpretation of the data, focusing the analysis on the perceptions, by different organizational actors, of the contribution of HRM to organizational performance. The chapter ends with the conclusion.

2 Some notes on the evolution of HRM

The perception that exists at present about HRM, both regarding theory and practice, is the result of a historical development. This development had advances and retreats, changes in designation, controversies at the conceptual level and development of strategies of performance, changes in the type and nature of responsibilities and functions, changes in roles and role expectations, and changes in structure and hierarchical-functional relationships (Legge, 1989; Kennoy, 1990; Storey, 1992; Beer, 1997; Cabral-Cardoso, 1999, 2004; Guest, 1999; Kaufman, 2001; Dolan et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010). Therefore, the history and theory of HRM needs to be contextualized within the evolution of paradigms over the last two decades of the 20th Century (Jamrog & Overholt, 2004; McKenna et al., 2011).

The change from a paradigm of productivity to a paradigm of competitiveness implied one of the biggest challenges for HR managers. That is, HR managers had to position themselves in a way that would give sense and meaning to their responsibilities and functions in terms of everyday actions (Brewster, 1999; Kaufman, 2001; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Donald & Bleekers, 2012). Such a move was required by the distance that exists between the rhetoric and the practice that characterizes the function of HRM managers (Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995; Conner & Ulrich, 1996; Cascio, 1998, 2000; Purcell, 2001; Zanoni & Janssens, 2003; Cabral-Cardoso, 2006; Dolan et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010).

Gradually, throughout the 20th Century, it was possible to notice an evolution from normative approaches, focused on productivity, towards approaches of a contingent nature, in which the paradigm was one of competitiveness and quality (Legge, 1989; Torrington & Hall, 1991; Schuler & Jackson, 1997; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Bloom & Van Reenen, 2011; Chênevert & Tremblay, 2011; Bloom et al., 2012). At the same time, management came to be seen as more than just a set of techniques and practices that improve with time, and took on more strategic and operationally stronger values, principles, and institutional processes (Shore et al., 2009; Lemmergaard, 2009; Bloom et al., 2011).

The developments in HRM, both in theory and practice, occurred after the 1990s, with more fluid, flexible, and decentralized organizational structures. Greater emphasis was given to training and the development of networks of multifunctional and multidisciplinary teams, which reveals a new mentality regarding how to manage and address situations. The predominant organizational mentality was supported by the principles of MacGregor's Y theory (Senge, 1990; Ulrich, 1997a,b,c;

Rego et al., 2006), which is future oriented and focuses on innovation, knowledge and creativity (Senge, 1990; Maxwell & Watson, 2006; Dolan et al., 2010; Guest, 2010; Ng, 2011). The organizational environment was characterized by a high variability and unpredictability, providing intense and discontinuous changes (Ling et al., 2008; Stainback et al., 2010; Long et al., 2013).

People were perceived as proactive, endowed with intelligence, knowledge, skills, and differentiated abilities, which should be identified, developed, and enhanced in terms of organizational performance and individual motivation (Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Pereira & Gomes, 2012). Freedom and autonomy, as well as commitment and responsibility, emerged as the main motivation strategies for workers (Teal, 1996; Gilbert, 1999; Dolan et al., 2010; Waldman et al., 2012). The underlying concept not only assumed that the worker was motivated by economic needs, but also emphasized the importance of social, psychological, and emotional factors. It also stressed the relevance assumed by informal structures and communication, motivational and leadership processes, as constrainers of the performance and commitment of workers (Cabral-Cardoso, 1999; Boon et al., 2011; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Bloom et al., 2011; Waldman et al., 2012; Pereira & Gomes, 2012).

A set of new trends emerged from the last two decades of the 20th Century, putting pressure on HRM activities to add value to companies. The increase in productivity and the need to be internationally competitive, by featuring high quality standards, are some of these trends (Dolan et al., 2010; McKenna et al., 2011; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Winkler et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015). On the one hand, organizational discourses revealed a tendency to focus on strategic management at the level of operations, research and development, information technology, product development, innovative marketing, and HR management (Dolan et al., 2010). On the other hand, many scholars of the HRM area observed and advocated the development of a critical role in organizations (Ulrich et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2009; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Winkler et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015). These scholars highlighted that effective HR management requires both an understanding of the trends that emerge in a complex and volatile world and a redefining of the focus of HRM to boost the company's effectiveness. HRM must have a strategy of diagnosis and anticipation of reality and an excellent ability to read events in the context in which they arise and, whenever possible, to adopt a proactive approach supported by appropriate communication systems and effective leadership (Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011; Wheeler et al., 2012; Pereira &

Gomes, 2012; Yamamoto, 2009, 2013; Long et al., 2013; Winkler et al., 2013; Snell et al., 2014; Barrick et al., 2015).

3 Scope of HRM

According to Brewster (1997), since the beginning of the 1980s the personnel function, and the respective departments, have been the subject of multiple discussions at the level of their professional class. One reason has to do with the fact that, at least at the level of discourse, human resources are considered by many managers as the most valuable and the rarest resource of the organization, since it is impossible to copy. Thus, the human resource needs to be managed properly and professionally, according to the organization's business and its evolutionary trends (Porter, 1985, 1990; Farndale, 2005; Ng, 2011; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Snell et al., 2014; Barrick et al., 2015). Another reason is related to the changes the function of HRM has undergone and the new challenges faced by organizations at this level, namely: meaning and emphasis attributed to HRM; characteristics and responsibilities of HRM; and responsibilities of line managers (Brewster & Hegewisch, 1993; Buyens & De Vos, 2001; Farndale, 2005; Andolsek & Stebe, 2005; Mintzberg, 2006; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Breitfelder & Dowling, 2008; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2011a,b; Long et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015).

The HR body encompasses several of these issues and has the following responsibilities: diagnose and act proactively in the face of pressures for change; enhance the importance of HRM through actions that favor the creation of organizational value; support dynamically and critically the situations that have to do with changes in the nature of the work, particularly the temporal flexibility of work, contract flexibility and flexibility of functions; and, finally, support line managers as needed (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003; Farndale, 2005; Andolsek & Stebe, 2005; Bondarouk et al., 2009; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011). Notwithstanding the summarized description of some HRM responsibilities, these activities differ according to context, and may be affected by organizational factors (such as company size, activity sector, type of business, relationship with other entities, policies and general strategies of the company), and by socio-cultural, economic and political factors (Des Horts & Segalla, 1998; Cabral-Cardoso, 1999, 2004; Farndale, 2005; Ling et al., 2008; Dewettinck & Remue, 2011).

Brewster (1997) considered that it was precisely the strategic dimension of HRM which lent credibility to the role of the HR board and of

the HR manager in addressing issues and emerging themes in this area. Indeed, that dimension is the most effective lever to avoid its devaluation and increase reliability levels and ensure the importance of the various organizational contexts (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2011; Azmi, 2011). According to Brewster (1997, p. 10), one of the characteristics that distinguishes HRM from personnel management is the closer connection of HRM with the requirements of operational management. The role of the technician is no longer to manage and control systems, but is increasingly to provide advice and support to line managers in achieving their goals (Dolan et al., 2010; Ng, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2011a,b).

Taking into consideration these perspectives, HRM can be defined as a management approach to relations and quality of work interactions, with a set of different policies and practices to personnel management (Ribeiro, 2003, p. 49). This differentiation is achieved, on the one hand, through greater involvement and coordination with behavioral and management sciences, and, on the other hand, with more and better knowledge of the business and its development prospects, together with the connection of strategic and operational characteristics of HRM with policies and overall organizational strategies to get results and add value (Benkhoff, 1997; Buhler, 2008; Shore et al., 2009; Dolan et al., 2010; Stravrou et al., 2010; Azmi, 2011; Bloom et al., 2012; Barrick et al., 2015).

4 Role of HRM

The evolution of HRM has led to the need for a definition of the main roles assigned to those responsible for this area of organizational management. The assumption and performance of multiple different roles has given HRM an increasingly important role in defining the portfolio of responsibilities, winning action space, and a recognition of its effective contribution to the organization (Ulrich, 1997a,b, 1998a,b; Sculion & Starkey, 2000; Kaufman, 2001; Becker, 2004; Dolan et al., 2010). After the 1980s, with the paradigm shift from productivity to competitiveness and quality, the emphasis on learning ability, adjustment and flexibility, proactivity, innovation and creativity of organizations has become essential to organizational development and survival, and to the HRM function (Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997a,b, 1998a,b; Caldwell, 2002; Stavrou & Brewster, 2005; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Barrick et al., 2015).

Several typologies of HRM roles emerged based mainly on the evolution of the personnel function, from personnel administration to personal functions, to HRM, and, more recently, the strategic management of

human resources (SMHR). SMHR assumes that people and their proper management are a key factor and a potential competitive advantage (Porter, 1985, 1990; Legge, 1995; Beer, 1997; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Shore et al., 2009).

One of the best known typologies of HRM, dating from 1986, was developed by Tyson and Fell (1986), and is still considered very useful for understanding the roles of HR managers (Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011; Uyar & Deniz, 2012). This typology presents four areas of action, which are expected to be assumed and developed by skilled HR managers, namely: preserve the organization's core values; promote actions that contribute to organizational sustainability; secure and maintain the organization's boundaries; and finally, manage processes of change (see also, Torrington, 1989; Legge, 1995; Caldwell, 2001; Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011; Uyar & Deniz, 2012). One of the roles highlighted by Tyson and Fell (1986) is the *Architect*, a role focused on business and achieving results.

Another typology was proposed by Torrington and Hall (1991), for whom the categories correspond to stereotypical ways of characterizing HR managers from an evolutionary perspective. One of the categories is *man of the organization*, which emerges when HRM is integrated with management objectives, and wherein the role of HR manager is oriented towards organizational effectiveness and taking part in the definition of objectives. Another category assumes the role of *resources analyst*, which translates as a development in the role of the HR manager, who focuses more on the analysis of those characteristics of HR that fit the company's strategic plans (see also, Beer, 1997; Keating et al., 2000). The importance of the strategic aspects of business and personnel management for HRM and HR managers, in which one of the main objectives is to maximize the potential of the organization through HR, is highlighted by the typology proposed by Wiley (1992; see also Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999; Cabral-Cardoso, 1999; De Saá-Pérez & García-Falcón, 2002).

In his proposed typology, Ulrich (1997a, b) mentions, among several roles, the one of *strategic partner*, which poses some challenges in terms of responsibilities for professionals in HRM, at the level of policies and alignment of objectives with the organization's strategy (vertical fit) (Miles & Snow, 1984; Delery & Doty, 1996; Kostova & Roth, 2002; Aumann & Ostroff, 2006); and a horizontal fit through greater consistency, coherence, and complementarity between HRM practices and techniques (Aumann & Ostroff, 2006; Gates & Langevin, 2010). Another role that has been highlighted is the one of *change agent*, where the

persons responsible for HRM are assumed as facilitators in the process of understanding and adhering to change, encouraging and involving all potential actors in that change and, thus, contributing to a better acceptance, implementation, and adaptation (Werbwl & Demarie, 2001; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Long et al., 2013).

Behind these roles lie, on the one hand, the capabilities and skills of those responsible for HRM to add value to the business, and, on the other hand, the capacity to promote and develop efficient and contextually effective processes, fostering the sustainable development of the organization and its distinctive and competitive nature (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) also mention the importance of HRM professionals being perceived as credible, reliable, and competent (see also, Sanders et al., 2008). Simultaneously, HR professionals should show skills in five areas: strategic contribution, business knowledge, personal credibility, HR delivery, and HR technology (Paauwe & Boselie, 2005; Sanders et al., 2008).

This positioning of the HR professional must be based on efficient and effective communication systems in terms of form, content, and process, to contribute to the promotion of social and professional interactions between the various sectors of an organization (Torrington & Hall, 1991; Ulrich, 1997c; Storey, 1992; Caldwell, 2003; Andraescu, 2005; Hutchinson & Purcell, 2010; Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011; Donald & Bleekers, 2012; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Barrick et al., 2015).

5 Expectations of HRM and the HR department

From a strategic and operational point of view, organizations have multiple objectives, among which are: economic and financial success; organizational climate of excellence; recognition as an ethical and socially responsible organization; development and recognition of good practices (Galang & Ferris, 1997; McIntyre, 2004; Rynes, 2004; Andraescu, 2005; Bartram et al., 2009; Zuzeviciuté & Tereseviciéné, 2010; Davila et al., 2010). Additionally, the organization has a responsibility towards its workers to strengthen or help enhance their skills. To do so, it needs to possess compensation mechanisms, motivation systems, and management and career development policies, which enable levels of effective and affective commitment (Andraescu, 2005; Bartram et al., 2009; Zuzeviciuté & Tereseviciéné, 2010; Bloom et al., 2012; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Snell et al., 2014).

What is expected of HRM and the HR department (and, inevitably, of HR managers) is that they be aware of the concerns of workers and

able to convey them at organizational levels where they can be solved. What is more, HRM is also expected to be capable of understanding social change in an increasingly global world and, in a proactive way, to prepare the organization to respond to the new challenges faced by HRM (Galang & Ferris, 1997; Fabi et al., 2009; Harris & Foster, 2010; Dolan et al., 2010; Khan & Khan, 2011; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013).

Personnel management bodies should develop their skills, their knowledge, and their expertise to help and support line managers in their responsibilities in terms of managing their HR. This way, personnel management bodies can stimulate the participation of line managers in the final selection of their employees, in their reception and integration, in the performance assessment process, in identifying training needs, and in the design of remuneration proposals (Cabral-Cardoso, 2004; Williams, 2008; Hunter & Renwick, 2009; Bondarouk et al., 2009; Dolan et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013).

According to another perspective, HRM, its specific bodies and skilled professionals are also perceived as being essential to the development of the organization and to the formulation and implementation of its strategic directives (Azmi, 2011; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Long et al., 2013). The expectation of a strategic HRM is based on the premise that the balance between HR values, systems, policies, and practices with the organization and business strategy is crucial for effective and strategic HRM (Fombrun et al., 1984; Miles & Snow, 1984; Delery & Doty, 1996; Galang & Ferris, 1997; Cooke & Saini, 2010; Stavrou et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013).

In the strategic perspective of HRM, there are approaches that assume a positioning of action of a more reactive nature, where HR programs, processes, and practices contribute to achieving the organization's objectives (Miles & Snow, 1984; Stavrou & Brewster, 2005; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Azmi, 2011). Nonetheless, other approaches are of a more proactive nature, with skilled HR managers participating in the strategic planning process, and where the organization's strategy may be conditioned by the available HR or by their characteristics (Miles & Snow, 1984; Wright, 1998; Aumann & Ostroff, 2006; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Uyar & Deniz, 2012; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013).

In everyday practice, one frequently witnesses the routinization of many of the responsibilities of HRM, although the expectation is for the HR body to assume a proactive stance and a strategic position in the

organization (Dolan et al., 2010; Uyar & Deniz, 2012; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015).

Being considered strategic to the organization, the activities of HRM came to be integrated in the cycles of planning, organization, implementation, and control, as happened with other areas of management that are more consolidated (Des Horts, 1987). This has led to HR managers playing an important role in promoting policies to stimulate commitment and organizational quality, as well as practices of flexibility and strategic integration (Yamamoto, 2009; Bloom et al., 2012; Sirca et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015).

6 Contribution of HRM to organizational performance

What is the contribution of HRM to organizational performance (OP)? This is one of the questions insistently asked by academics and practitioners. In an era that is strongly result oriented, this issue is of particular importance, and reveals a view of management as strongly utilitarian and instrumental (Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Azmi, 2011; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015).

The literature, with a strong North American and English influence (Stavrou et al., 2010), has revealed the existence of a link between HRM and OP; at the same time, it has shown that HRM practices and techniques allow an enhancement of OP and individual performance (Wright & Haggerty, 2005; Wright et al., 2005; Combs et al., 2006; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Stavrou et al., 2010; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Long et al., 2013).

Several studies have sought to establish the relationship between HRM and OP (Azmi, 2011; Armstrong, 2011; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015). One of the assumptions on which some studies support this relationship is the alignment between HRM principles and practices and organizational management strategies (Kapoor & Sherif, 2012; Barrick et al., 2015). This assumption is operationalized, in many studies, through the analysis of the existence of a horizontal fit and a vertical fit (Miles & Snow, 1984; Stavrou et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Pereira & Gomes, 2012). The horizontal fit exists between sets of HRM practices through customization and adaptation processes aimed at a greater consistency and interconnection. The vertical fit embodies an alignment between HRM's systems and processes and the organization's objectives and strategies (Aumann & Ostroff, 2006).

In the literature concerning SHRM and the relation between HRM and OP, there is an emphasis on the existence of specific HRM practices as important to the development of HR, as a strategy to establish a link

with the final outputs of the organization in terms of good performance (Huselid, 1995; Delery & Doty, 1996; Lepak & Snell, 2002; Boselie et al., 2005; Combs et al., 2006; Nguyen et al., 2010; Sung & Choi, 2014). Corroborating this trend in the literature, Sung and Choi (2014) argue that the development of HR may be based on a more quantitative configuration (an emphasis on indicators related to the costs of certain HRM practices and/or processes) or on a more qualitative one (an emphasis on more descriptive indicators of the potential value and impact of HRM practices and processes). Sung and Choi (2014) mention that the two configurations, quantitative and qualitative, can and should be envisaged in a complementary manner, leveraging mutual synergies, and allowing for an understanding of the processes that mediate the relationship between HRM, specifically, the development of human resources, and the organization's performance, as mentioned by Combs et al. (2006, p. 503; see also Sung & Choi, 2014, p. 852):

In the SHRM literature scholars have identified three mediating mechanisms that explain the SHRM – firm performance link: “(a) increasing employees’ knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), (b) empowering employees to act, and (c) motivating them to do so”.

According to Dany and Hatt (2009), the highest relationship between the strategic integration of HRM and the OP arises when decisions are made by specialists in that role, supported by the opinion of line managers, assuming that a proactive and synergistic partnership exists. When the HRM function is more decentralized to direct supervisors, that link is more tenuous or non-existent, resulting in the devaluation of this relationship and the loss of efficiency and effectiveness in a consistent and coherent resolution of situations and problems (cf. Cabral-Cardoso, 2004; Gilbert et al., 2011a,b; Stavrou et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010). On the other hand, this function also reduces its impact when one does not take into account the gains and the practical contributions that line managers can make to the processes of decisions, resolution, and progress of HRM.

As regards strategic integration issues and the degree of centralization, Brewster et al. (1997) presented a matrix of the strategic integration/power of the HR function, through which they compared levels of OP. The authors concluded that the most prolific organization is the one presenting a strong HR function, and it is also the one that is more concerned with OP. Other studies demonstrated that the organizations with better performance are those that give the HR manager a strong position, in terms of influence, in

the decision-making process concerning workers' issues, and allow them to do so in a close and positive link with the direct leadership (Beysseres Des Horts, 1988; Delbridge & Lowe, 1997; Buyens & De Vos, 2001; Kelly & Gennard, 2007; Lemmergaard, 2009; Dolan et al., 2010; Yamamoto, 2013; Sirca et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015). Nonetheless, Dany and Hatt (2009) did not consider that OP depends exclusively, in matters of HRM, on the existence of a strong HR function. However, they also highlighted a set of tools and strategies through which it is possible to have an ambitious HRM policy, such as training managers in these fields and their effective participation in the management of their teams.

Other studies have addressed the issue of the relationship between HRM and OP through two perspectives, non-contrasting but complementary, in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. Thus, HRM is effective when it helps to achieve results and business goals (Cascio, 2000; Ng, 2011; Bloom et al., 2012). On the other hand, the organization should take into account the characteristics of HR to enable the efficient development of systems and processes of HRM (Buhler, 2008; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009; Hutchinson & Purcell, 2010; Boon et al., 2011; Waldman et al., 2012; Barrick et al., 2015).

On a more behavioral basis, the perceptual approach is based on theoretical and empirical research that seeks to understand how HRM processes and practices learned by individuals are related to the OP (Delaney & Huselid, 1996; Lepak & Snell, 2002; Barrick et al., 2015). That is the case in studies on organizational climate (Gelade & Ivery, 2003), HR functions (Nishii et al., 2008), and perceived organizational support (Delaney & Huselid, 1996; Butts et al., 2009). Although this perceptual approach is not new (Paauwe & Boselie, 2005), most studies focused on the perceptions of specific actors concerning HRM practices, and mainly on the perceptions of HR professionals. The focus of this chapter is different since it tries to understand how diverse organizational actors perceive this issue.

According to Pereira and Gomes (2012), "Despite some empirical confirmation of the relationship between HR and performance, there is no consensus as to the mechanisms that explain this connection." (p. 4301) However, the nature, shape, processes, and evaluation of this relationship raise a number of issues:

- (1) Which HRM practices contribute to the OP and how? (Prowse & Prowse, 2010)
- (2) How do HRM techniques contribute to OP and, more specifically, to what kind of performance? (Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Barrick et al., 2015)

- (3) What metrics and indicators are there to evaluate OP and individual performance in terms of HRM outputs? (Lawler et al., 2004; Lombardi & White, 2009; Dulebohn & Johnson, 2013)

Some studies also mention the difficulty of establishing a consensus on what is meant by performance in general and in the field of HRM specifically and, consequently, the difficulty of developing and establishing the measurement metrics (Stavrou et al., 2010; Azmi, 2011; Dulebohn & Johnson, 2013). In some studies, performance is related to profit, in others with productivity or the degree of efficiency and effectiveness, or, at a different level, with aspects such as employee satisfaction and motivation, organizational climate indicators, levels of absenteeism and turnover, and levels of internal conflict (Huselid et al., 1997; Azmi, 2011; Dulebohn & Johnson, 2013; Barrick et al., 2015).

There are other studies that discuss the challenge of understanding how HRM practices and techniques contribute to performance, whether individual or organizational (Prowse & Prowse, 2010). This challenge may have contributed to the seemingly unfinished discussion about: What is HRM? What is its nature? What are the processes and content? What are the boundaries of its practices? Who are its protagonists? (Guest, 1991, 1999; Legge, 1995; Prowse & Prowse, 2010).

On a broader perspective, one must consider the assumptions and the different aspects valued differently by the models that characterized the evolutionary process of HRM during the 1980s and 1990s (and which still have an influence), in particular the hard and soft models of the schools of Michigan and Harvard (Beer et al., 1984; Fombrun et al., 1984). These two models have contributed to the development of research in which the outputs were marked by more instrumental principles (hard model), or more humanist ones (soft model). These models had repercussions on the concept of human resource, with the literature assuming it as a cost or as an investment, which inevitably limits the approach to the relationship between HRM and OP (Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995; Prowse & Prowse, 2010).

7 Methodology

7.1 Methodological positioning

This study is developed within the interpretative paradigm by assuming that reality is a social construction and cannot be understood independently from the actors who create that reality (Urquhart, 2013,

p.59). Within this paradigm, the empirical study is based on qualitative research in order to understand the phenomena through the meanings that individuals attribute to them (Myers, 2011). According to Myers (2011, p. 38):

Many social scientists claim that the social scientist does not stand, as it were, outside the subject matter looking in; rather the only way he or she can understand a particular social or cultural phenomenon is to look at it from the 'inside'. In other words, a social researcher must already speak the same language as the people being studied (or, at the very least, be able to understand an interpretation or translation of what has been said) if he or she is to understand any data at all. The 'raw data' for a social scientist include words that have already been meaningfully pre-structured by a group of fellow human beings.

In the empirical study, the methodological positioning is justified by the fact that the main objective is to identify dominions and saturate categories with the perceptions different organizational actors have about HRM (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Silverman, 2000; Atkinson, 2005; Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2006; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Within this paradigm, the researcher is both a subject and an interpreter of the situations and social phenomena, as are the individual participants in the study (Myers, 2011, p. 39).

7.2 Methods of data collection and analysis

The empirical study adopted interviews as the method of data collection. Given that this chapter is part of a broader project, the information provided here is simplified to correspond to the objective of the chapter. The broader study included the definition of the research questions and the construction of the semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was developed based on the literature, on the knowledge and practical experience of one of the researchers, who was a HRM manager for many years and, more importantly, on the results of an exploratory interview with an experienced HR manager. The interview guide consisted of 66 questions, which comprised biographical information about the interviewee and a comprehensive set of questions to collect data to accomplish the objectives of the broader study.

Among the questions were specific ones about the strategic role of HRM, and ones on the nature of the HRM function and the contribution of HRM to the performance of the organization. These are the ones that

corresponded to the objective of this chapter. To perform the interview analysis the grounded theory methodology was adopted, in particular a grounded analysis based on two fundamental operations: (1) posing questions with the objective to generate and connect concepts; and (2) establishing permanent comparisons by positioning the researcher as close as possible to the data and the field in which those emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Fernandes & Maia, 2001; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Laperrière, 2010; Urquhart, 2013). The analysis was confirmed and validated by a specialist in the use of grounded theory.

7.3 Participants

The empirical study included in this chapter covers ten companies, three multinationals and seven Portuguese. Two of the Portuguese companies have a family administration. Of the ten companies, two are medium-sized, albeit they are leaders in their field; the others are big companies (in terms of total assets, sales volume and number of employees). The criteria for selecting the companies were: having a HR department; having a person responsible for HR management with the category of Manager of HR and an effective performance of duties; and finally, the manager of HR being hierarchical and/or functionally subordinated to an administrator, a general manager, or a superior HR general manager.

To collect the data, 257 interviews were conducted, with an average duration of 90 minutes. The interviewees belonged to different hierarchical levels, such as: top managers; managers' peers; and collaborators from different organizational functions, with or without managerial responsibilities. The HR managers and their collaborators were also interviewed with the aim of comparing perceptions. The classification of the companies, their sector of activity, country of origin, number of interviews, and the codification of the interviewees are described in Table 4.1.

The interviewees covered a wide age range, from 19 to 82 years old, with labor seniority ranging from three months to 67 years at different stages of their careers. There was a balance in the gender distribution among the different professional categories, except for the administrator category, where there were only three women among 24 interviewees.

7.4 Procedures

After the exploratory interview with an experienced HR manager was conducted, as mentioned before, and after the interview guide was confirmed, data were collected by conducting semi-structured

Table 4.1 Classification of the data sample

Business clusters	Activity	Origin	Number of interviews by company	Codification of the interviewees
Multinational companies	A) Industrial	Sweden/USA	N = 27	Sub. 1–27
	B) Chemistry	Germany	N = 27	Sub. 28–54
	C) Technology	Germany	N = 28	Sub. 55–82
National (Portuguese) companies	D) Industrial	Portugal	N = 25	Sub. 83–107
	E) Technology		N = 25	Sub. 108–132
	F) Commercial		N = 26	Sub. 133–158
	G) Technology		N = 25	Sub. 159–183
Family companies	H) Industrial		N = 26	Sub. 184–209
	I) Commercial	Portugal	N = 24	Sub. 210–233
	J) Textile		N = 24	Sub. 234–257

interviews, performed individually, on the premises of each of the companies involved in the study, in places specifically assigned to the task. The interviews were carried out between 2007 and 2010. The first contact was made by phone with administrators and HR managers known to the first author. The purpose of this first call was to explain the project, its main goals, and to schedule a meeting for a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives and the data required, as well as for the definition of the number of interviews and the procedures for their selection.

At the beginning of each interview, the research project and the objectives were explained. The researcher asked permission to tape record the interviews and all interviewees gave their consent. The guarantee of confidentiality of the interviewee was registered, with a statement that the content of the interview would be fully transcribed by the interviewer, and would be available for confirmation. All the interviewees declined seeing the transcription.

As mentioned before, in an era marked by the pressure to achieve results and fulfill objectives at any cost or sacrifice, it is fundamental to understand the contribution that HRM may have to organizational performance and results. This contribution can be of various types and of different natures, and can also be perceived differently by different organizational actors or by the same actor at different moments in his/her professional life. Therefore, the next section provides the empirical study of the perception of different organizational actors about the value added by HRM and its contribution to OP.

8 Perceptions of different organizational actors about HRM's value added and its contribution to OP

The data collected through the interviews reveal a set of categories that were grouped into broader dominions. They allowed us to analyze the contributions of HRM and the respective protagonists through the perceptions of different organizational actors by reference to broader contexts (such as the organization to which they belong), or narrower contexts (such as situations that have occurred or behaviors assumed in the organization to which they belong or have belonged). Therefore, according to the interviewees, the main categories are: *activities perceived as being the responsibility of HRM*; *performance indicators of HRM*; *valuation of systems of indicators*; and finally, *obstacles to obtaining HRM performance indicators*.

8.1 Activities perceived as being the responsibility of HRM

In this category the main areas, as shown in Table 4.2, are: activities assigned to HRM (225 references¹); impacts of activities (182 references); valued activities by type of respondent actor (225 references); activities more highlighted in terms of companies (198 references).

Regarding the *type of activities* assigned to HRM, it can be concluded that there is a fairly complete knowledge with respect to the activities considered traditional. Aligned with human resources management manuals, the participants perceived the following activities as the ones under the scope of HRM: description and analysis of roles (127 references); recruitment and selection (225 references); reception and integration (179 references); professional training (225 references);

Table 4.2 Activities perceived as being the responsibility of HRM

Categories	Characteristics
Activities assigned to HRM	Type of activities Scope of developed activities Degree of operationalization of the activities
Impacts of activities	Degree of the impact Nature of the impact
Valued activities by type of respondent actor	Characterization of activities by type of actor
Activities more highlighted in terms of companies	Identification of activities by business cluster

performance appraisal (186 references); career management (83 references); and remuneration systems (225 references).

Data analysis also allows us to conclude that, mainly in Portuguese (national) companies, there is a nuance, explained by many respondents, between what they consider each of these HRM activities should be and what they are (102 references out of a possible 225). This difference in participant expectations reflects an awareness of what desired and actual HRM is. This awareness reflects one of the items referred to in the HRM literature review to do with the distance between the discourse produced and the actual practice.

HR departments of the participating companies, besides developing all these activities, with specific departments for each of the activities, also develop other differentiated activities recognized by the different actors. For example, more informal activities, such as the organization of gatherings including families, themed walks, protocols with kindergartens, or sports gyms.

Another example has to do with equal opportunities policies and diversity management. Some participants highlight that these policies are not sufficiently advertised by the HRM department. This is in line with literature that considers communication one of the most important instruments for enhancing HRM practices in terms of outputs for the organization (Azmi, 2011; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Barrick et al., 2015).

Regarding the *scope of developed activities*, most participants consider that HRM develops many and important activities with a broad scope (formal and informal), *but could do many more* (Subj. director par) (179 references express this idea). Nonetheless, when asked to identify new activities, by putting themselves in the place of the HR Director, most interviewees showed a general difficulty in identifying and operationalizing new activities (184 references express this idea), which was consolidated in a third feature called *degree of operationalization of the activities*.

Regarding the category *impacts of activities* of HRM, data reveal the characteristics: *degree of the impact* and *nature of the impact*, regarding the perceived impact of HRM on the performance of the business. The tendency is to consider the *degree of the impact* low to medium level, which, from the analysis of the data, seems to stem from a lack of information about the activities developed by HRM and the results of those activities. One relevant example has to do with organizational climate questionnaires held by all participating companies, with 136 subjects arguing they were not informed of the results. The same situation occurred, according to the participants, with the presentation of suggestions, both with suggestion boxes or online suggestions. In their words,

nobody cares because, as they say in my hometown, it falls on deaf ears (Subj. undifferentiated operational collaborator). These situations generate reactions of loss of credibility and mistrust of HRM (131 references), malfunction of communication between HRM and line managers (82 references), company discomfort in revealing results or making changes (64 references), and, consequently, a decrease in employee participation in future requests (126 references).

Concerning the *nature of the impact*, the data analysis highlights aspects connected with the *subjective nature of the impact classification* (214 references) and the *deferral in time of the impact of activities* (182 references). In this respect, it stresses the difficulty in associating some activities with the HR director or department, leading to talk of the need for a HRM communication and marketing strategy. There is also the perception that there is no direct link between actions and results (179 references). This perception of deferred time, associated with the mobility that can exist at manager level, as is the case in companies in the tertiary sector that participated in this study, frequently leads to measures within HRM not being implemented:

and the result takes time to be observed and to qualify in terms of performance appraisal, the orientation is given to focus on situations with results in the short or medium term...otherwise what happens is that we can be jeopardizing time in an activity that might have results that we will not enjoy ourselves. (Subj. managers' peer) (78 references express this idea, mainly managers' peers)

The third category, *valued activities by type of respondent actor*, presents a basic feature: *characterization of activities by type of actor*. What data analysis reveals is that at the level of population with management responsibilities, namely administrators, managers' peers, and line managers, the participants' answers highlight existing activities, but add greater depth, more detail, and greater speed in providing the results of such activities (161 references). In turn, the technical staff population proposed as main activities to be developed those that are linked to career management (20 references in 20 possible) and equal career opportunities (18 references in 20 possible). These aspects work, in this population of participants, as instrumental for a set of issues that have to do with perceived dissimilarity and equity of career development opportunities for actors with management performance versus the technical staff (18 references in 20 possible). The activities more often perceived by operational employees and undifferentiated administrative staff are the following: processing of

salaries (37 references in 40 possible); legal interpretations and formalization of contracts (32 references in 40 possible); and solving diversified everyday problems (30 references in 40 possible).

Further analysis of data from the interviews has summarized the activities and processes relating to HR managers perceived by the different types of organizational actors, regardless of which company they belong to. The population *administrators* highlighted the importance given to strategic activities of design, planning, and organization, combined with operational activities and with a relevant role for the company. There is an orientation to achieve results. In the population *managers' peers* there emerges, from the data analysis, a set of activities that are instrumental to the activities developed by the HR manager, namely concerning professional careers promotion and progression, or assistance in the resolution of sensitive issues for the respective areas of management. This group also privileges the pragmatism of the HR manager's role and his/her ability to establish partnership relations, based on appropriate communication systems. Although this group considers the strategic and operational dimensions as complementary, greater emphasis is given to operational performance, since operational results are considered more important at the moment of performance assessment.

Regarding the *collaborators with managerial responsibilities*, the privileged activities are the ones valued by the respective hierarchical superiors, which may be understood as a process of cascading needs. The concern with activities that allow different situations to be solved pragmatically and quickly also stands out, in particular the needs of the employees they coordinate.

Among the *collaborators with technical responsibilities*, the analysis reveals an instrumental position in relation to the activities of the HR manager, motivated by the expectation of fairness between technical careers and management careers. Activities that promote interactions with the HR manager are also highlighted. Finally, the population of *undifferentiated operational and administrative collaborators* highlights HR manager activities that are geared to pragmatically understanding and solving everyday problems, and HRM policies and practices that promote impartiality and humanity in management.

The fourth category concerns *activities more highlighted in terms of companies* (198 references), in which the characteristic is the *identification of activities by business cluster*. An analysis by cluster shows that for the multinational companies the most highlighted HRM activities were: professional training (82 references); staffing (76 references); recruitment and selection (64 references); control of processes (61 references);

and careers and expatriates management (36 references). For the cluster of national companies, the most highlighted activities were: recruitment and selection (114 references); performance appraisal (112 references); career management (112 references); efficient and effective control of the technical and administrative management (94 references); and professional training (86 references). Finally, for the cluster of family companies, the highlighted activities were: professional training (50 references); staffing (44 references); efficient and effective control of the technical and administrative management (38 references); performance appraisal (36 references); and promotion of activities that stress the culture and image of the organization (32 references).

Within this category, analysis of the data of all the participating companies shows the importance of HRM in implementing activities that build up people and their skills (137 references) in the context of appropriate leadership (164 references), in particular *leadership close to people* (Subj. undifferentiated operational collaborator; 129 references express this idea). In the words of a line manager: *whoever is at the helm has to be an example and to know not only the routes, but also the routes of people and to be present in bad and good times. Inspire ... give confidence and develop what one has and wants to give* (Subj. col. line manager, 141 references express these ideas). Nonetheless, there is an explicitly assumed difficulty in operationalizing such activities/initiatives (185 references).

8.2 Performance indicators of HRM

In this area, the main categories are presented in Table 4.3.

From the analysis of the data, there emerges a perception which translates into three categories. One of the categories is the *operationalization of indicators*, with the *degree of operationalization* as the most emphasized characteristic, and with the recognition that it is very difficult to operationalize indicators for this area of management (203 references).

Another category is related to the *types of indicators*, with the highlighted characteristic being the *nature of the indicators*. For this characteristic, the

Table 4.3 Performance indicators of HRM

Categories	Characteristics
Operationalization of indicators	Degree of operationalization
Types of indicators	Nature of the indicators
Designation of systems of indicators	Characterization of the systems of indicators

data show a weak quantitative nature, subjectivity, and intangibility of some established indicators. These are strong aspects that result in the perception that this HRM has few quantifiable contributions to the final performance of the company (213 references).

The manifestation of this perception of *indicators that are very qualitative and subjective* (Subj. managers' peer) reveals, through the analysis of the data, the idea that *the absence of, or the enormous difficulty in, producing indicators and quantitative metrics in most issues of HRM constrains heavily the assessment we make, and hence, the perception that one has of this area of management with regard to its contributions to the company's performance* (Subj. managers' peer).

The difficulties perceived regarding the performance indicators of this area of management, translated in problems of operationalization and quantification, are a handicap with consequences expressed in lower credibility, reliability, and respectability mentioned by a significant number of participants (186 references). To corroborate these perceptions, the words used by some participants are as follows:

the difficulty in adopting a more objective reading of HR and the performance of its actors, I refer to HR manager and HR department, leads to perception of loss of effectiveness, efficiency and potential of intervention, which undermines this important area. (Subj. line manager)

we can evaluate and control the management performance of an area if we can measure it. Now, at the level of HRM it is not easy to have objectivity and hence to measure. We improve what can be measured. (Subj. technical collaborator)

A third category is *designation of systems of indicators* of performance of HRM (186 references), characterized as: subjective (181 references); partial (166 references); nonexistent (142 references); irrelevant (126 references); and unfair (95 references). Nonetheless, when these interviewees are asked to provide examples of quantitative indicators, the answers are diversified and contradictory. On the one hand, they report the existence of a very significant set of quantitative indicators based on data for the social balance of the company. On the other hand, some of them explain the great difficulty in establishing/providing operational indicators in this area, even of a qualitative nature.

Data analysis also reveals another curious aspect for two particular groups of participants: administrators and managers' peers. The

administrators (12 references in 24 possible) argue for the need for productivity metrics for their work teams, assigning to those responsible for the HRM the responsibility for drawing up these metrics. Faced with the fact that these performance indicators refer to teams that they coordinate directly or indirectly, and therefore, that they should develop such metrics themselves, the most frequent answer is the lack of time to dedicate to this subject (12 administrators and 82 managers' peers), followed by the greatest impartiality of the indicators when made by those in charge of HRM (nine administrators and 91 managers' peers), and finally, the difficulty in building such metrics (five administrators and 68 managers' peers).

These aspects arise more frequently in the case of national (Portuguese) companies, while in the case of multinational companies the metrics are more defined and the population of managers' peers have a sense of their responsibility in defining both these metrics and individual and collective performance indicators. In these multinational companies, the HR manager provides support and help on the legal feasibility and motivational potential of the developed indicators.

This question also depends on the activity sector and the company's business. For example, in a technology company it is perceived as being:

very difficult to assess the performance of a software design engineer as there are days when, at the end of the day, not much was produced and, in other cases, the attempt to understand what the customer wants is very difficult and time-consuming, making it difficult to quantify or qualify this diagnostic work that has to be done together with the customer. (Subj. managers' peer)

Another example directly connected with HRM has to do with metrics at the level of recruitment and selection and the contribution to filling a particular post. In this case, the participants tend to perceive speed and quality as the criterion to be considered in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. But they often do not reflect, in their assessments, the greater or lesser availability of supply of certain types of professionals in the labor market. Furthermore, they do not take into account the effect of filling a vacancy by external selection, the temporal context, the relationship between supply and demand and expectations/realities of the labor market for a given job/position, and what the company is willing to offer as compensation.

8.3 Appreciation of systems of indicators

The analysis of this dominion highlights the category *results versus processes* (174 references) embodied in the characteristic *degree of appreciation* that is assigned to each of these indicators by the different types of participants. The participants, particularly those with managerial duties, emphasize results rather than processes and refer to the importance that the organizational actors, administrators, and hierarchical superiors assign in practice to the results, as highlighted in the following quotes:

We live in an age where what counts are results and everything must be quantifiable (Subj. line manager);

The results justify all and more and more is demanded and often no one takes into account whether there are resources, time, human capacity ... It is no use. The results are sacred (Subj. managers' peer);

I think we live in the era not of information and knowledge, but of results, and the pressure is huge; comparisons with other units of this multinational are permanent. Everyone puts pressure on everyone and this is a pressure cooker without safety valves, the damage will be huge when it explodes, for sure. (Subj. managers' peer)

Despite the tendency to emphasize less the importance of results in multinational companies, even there the primacy is given to results. Undifferentiated administrative and operational collaborators also express the strong pressure for results, which have become a *compulsive and aggressive obsession* in their companies (Subj. undifferentiated operational collaborator). The population of technical staff also appreciates results, however, among 20 respondents there are 18 references to the importance of the *enhancement of processes as the best way of achieving the results in a more consistent and sustained manner* (Subj. technical collaborator).

Another referred aspect has to do with non-explicit or ambivalent distinction and appreciation of what concerns internal performance indicators. These can be related to the expected behavior of workers, the degree of involvement, the commitment levels with the organization and with the respective work team, and the degree of positive and/or negative social identity. They can also be connected to internal indicators related to performance, such as for example: productivity, quality of service, level of turnover and absenteeism, and the degree of internal conflict. There is higher level of complexity introduced by

some participants when they refer to the need to link HRM practices with sales, margins, financial performance, and the organization's profits.

8.4 Obstacles to obtaining HRM performance indicators

The category emerging from the data is *characterization of the obstacles* (198 references), which is connected with *identification of obstacles* that act as a barrier to the creation of indicators to evaluate the performance of HRM and its contribution to business performance. After one overcomes the first perception of *privilege*, which surrounds HRM and its professionals when compared with other actors that have to be accountable for their performance in a very objective way, the participants² believe that the difficulty in obtaining specific indicators concerning HRM is the result of several factors.

The factors perceived as hampering the construction of appropriate and relevant indicators for HRM are: (1) difficulty in operationalizing certain issues and activities of HRM (189 references); (2) complexity of the issues of HRM (156 references); (3) subjectivity inherent to the social object *persons* (188 references); (4) unpredictability of the variable persons (130 references), which leads to *difficulty in defining exactly what is sought with the indicators of HRM* (Subj. undifferentiated operational collaborator) (107 references express this idea); (5) lack of training in management of HRM professionals (104 references); (6) perceived lack of knowledge and little or no propensity to work with numbers by HR managers (89 references); (7) perception of top management complacency towards this management skill handicap by specialists in HRM (85 references); (8) communication difficulties between HRM, top management, and line management, aggravated by the perception of inadequate communication systems (81 references); (9) ability of HR directors to "dodge" the presentation of indicators (82 references); and (10) *easiness with which HR directors dismiss such obligations, taking refuge in the subjective characteristics of the function* (Subj. managers' peer) (79 references express this idea).

These two last factors can be illustrated by two quotations from the interviews with HR directors:

The pressure to quantify everything is huge and our area is no exception, the problem in practice is that there are situations that are not possible to quantify, or we and other colleagues in the company do not know how to do it. (Subj. HR manager) (idea expressed by all HR managers)

I have had a colleague who told me something like “in HR you have a fantastic life since it is seen as subjective and nobody holds you accountable for anything”, to which I replied something like: “as you see there are a lot of ways to be held accountable”. (Subj. HR manager) (six of 12 HR managers shared this idea)

It should also be noted that, of the 225 people without specialized responsibilities in HRM that were interviewed, 165 mentioned, in general terms, what the social balance was and that it represented business variables quantitatively. When asked about the nature and content of the social balance, the number dropped to only 62 participants.³ Twelve HR managers recognize the need to disseminate social balance more, and eight of these managers⁴ mention the importance, based on the current social balance, to have a broader, transversal social balance with the contribution of the various areas.

Another conclusion resulting from the analysis of data, concerning performance indicators of HRM, is explicit in the following quotation from a female HR manager:

the pressure for results and the eagerness to obtain them almost immediately is the watchword. As HR manager I have some ... a lot of difficulty to explain that in HR often there are no immediate results and even, for example, the payroll processing, that many think is just to press a button and it is ready, even that is not so simple. When I say that one thing is to quantify the production done in one day and another would be to quantify motivation, they look at me as if I was an alien, but when I ask them to sit down and help operationalize they cannot stand more than ten minutes...they know I am right, but the next day they return to exactly the same criticism, always with the same argument: “if we are asked for results you cannot be an exception.” (Subj. HR manager)

9 Analysis and discussion of results

Understanding how HRM is perceived by different types of organizational actors, in terms of adding value and contributing to the performance of an organization, was one of the objectives of the broader research developed. From the analysis of the interviews it can be highlighted that, for the participants of the different companies, HRM is considered to have a set of practices and techniques that, properly adapted to the organization and business, can add value and contribute to the

sustainable development of the company and for those that work there, a perception that is corroborated by the literature (Porter, 1980, 1985; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Buller & McEvoy, 2012).

Regarding the contribution of HRM to organizational performance, the perception of the interviewees is that there exists a relationship between these two factors. There are, however, different valuations on the basis of professional categories and the hierarchical or functional roles of respondents, in line with the literature (Gates & Longevin, 2010; Stavrou et al., 2010). As described in the literature review, the participants also describe a polysemic and polymorphic nature of the term performance (Dulebohn & Johnson, 2103; Sung & Choi, 2014).

The different connotations and forms that performance can take, both at theoretical and practical levels, boosted by the dynamics of change that organizations have, makes it a concept with multiple meanings. The empirical study presented in this chapter shows that, when talking about performance, it is possible to refer to financial performance, margin obtained, and final profit. Or, it can be understood as productivity, quality of service, low turnover rate, good organizational climate, or appropriate timings and satisfactory resolution of different situations, as also mentioned in the literature (Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Dulebohn & Johnson, 2103). This multiplicity of meanings reflects on the analysis of the collected data, by introducing ambiguities, such as: (1) what are the expectations regarding the role of HRM and its protagonists; (2) how to conceptualize and operationalize indicators and metrics to evaluate the impact of HRM in the final performance of the organization; (3) how to allocate responsibilities, both to experts and those responsible for HRM, as well as those responsible for each of the areas of management, both in terms of practice and technique in the design, implementation, and monitoring of such indicators (Gates & Langevin, 2010; Dulebohn & Johnson, 2013; Sung & Choi, 2014).

Similar to the literature, the empirical study also reflects, transversely, a difficulty in understanding the mechanisms that favor the relationship between HRM and performance (Stavrou et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010). There is also a rhetoric about the importance of HRM that often does not coincide with the principles, policies and, especially, with the designed and implemented practices (Legge, 1989, 1995; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Sung & Choi, 2014).

It is also clear that the perception of the participants is that many of the actions and activities proposed and implemented by HRM do not have an immediate return. This perception of the deferred nature of the results of HRM leads to the fact that many of the actions are not

implemented by individual logic with an instrumental nature, as can be understood in the following quote:

One of the problems in this area is that in some situations and initiatives...the results are slow to be seen and sometimes need a large personal investment. To be honest, the reality is that when the time comes to give accounts what is considered in my assessment depends on the objective results, more specifically, on how much I was able to increase earnings and reduce costs. Now look, I may implement actions which I consider important and then when the results begin to appear I'm no longer here, we make changes, and who will profit is another person. I know it is not politically correct to say this, but it is the reality and not only in this company, I have had other experiences and things worked in the same way. (Subj. managers' peer)

This deferral attributed to many practices, activities, and actions of HRM has some explanations, according to data resulting from interviews, in particular the nature of the area, the relevance that people assume in these processes, and the fact that people's agreement and commitment is variable. As already mentioned, the emphasis on HRM activities is arguable and in some cases they are not seen as a value worth investing in.

In this relationship between HRM and performance, participants attributed value to some aspects, such as principles and HRM policies, and the practices and techniques used by HR professionals, in a comprehensive manner. Nevertheless, depending on their professional category and organizational positioning, they highlighted one compared to others. The practices are valued, on the one hand, due to the perceived benefits that each participant envisions for himself (relationship of instrumentality), for their working groups, and for the organization and, on the other hand, the quality recognized in practices and techniques.

The quality of HRM practices is recognized and perceived by respondents in terms of form (appealing, motivating, inspiring, simple and easy to implement and monitor); content (suitable for business, contextualized in the company's phase of life, useful and with a potential to add value to people and organizations), process (supported by good communication systems, aligned with company goals, and noticeable by all actors involved in the process), as described in the literature (Waldman et al., 2006; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Bloom et al., 2011; Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Sung & Choi, 2014; Amin et al., 2014).

Data analysis reveals, across all companies and all types of participant, that the communication system used in the organization, at management level in general and HRM in particular, is a factor of great importance, seen as a distinctive element in the organization. According to the data analysis and the literature, communication systems contribute to enhancing the value attributed to the practices and actions of HRM, highlighting the importance of a proper alignment of communication systems and processes with the contexts and the organization's culture (Kelly & Gennard, 1996; Skinner & Mabey, 1997; Buyens & De Vos, 2001; Ng, 2011; Bloom et al., 2012; Pereira & Gomes, 2012).

According to data from interviews, and aligned with the literature, the importance attributed to the existence of good communication systems focuses on form, content, and process, with special emphasis on the importance of feedback that allows: (1) to reconcile the position and perception in relation to the practices of HRM at the level of HRM specialists, top management, middle and line managers, and the workers themselves (Kelly & Gennard, 1996; Skinner & Mabey, 1997; Buyens & De Vos, 2001; Stavrou et al., 2010; Ng, 2011; Bloom et al., 2012; Pereira & Gomes, 2012); (2) to manage expectations regarding the quality of practices and their impact on organizational results, avoiding the often perceived mismatch of *practices very well designed but without any relation to the reality of the organization and the business typology* (Subj. technical collaborator) or *HRM processes decontextualized from reality and doomed to failure in terms of implementation* (Subj. line manager) (Amin et al., 2014); (3) to reverse perceptions that reflect a mindset according to which common sense is enough when it comes to managing people, as reflected in the words of a participant *between you and me, many of the things that are done are common sense* (Subj. undifferentiated administrative collaborator).

The lack of information and communication about the practices and techniques used creates mistrust, discredit and even, as is clear from analysis of the interviews, a disclaimer by HRM to assume their actions and performances. This perception of lack of communication is emphasized when it is assumed that it must be the direct responsibility of HRM specialists. However, intermediate and line managers are not without fault in those situations where HRM responsibilities have been decentralized (Stavrou et al., 2010; Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Pereira & Gomes, 2012).

The data analysis also revealed that, at the level of HRM practices, some respondents expressed the perception of a difference between what they wanted the practices to be and what they often are in reality.

This perception reveals an awareness of the distance between theory and practice, of a desired HRM and a practised HRM (Legge, 1989, 1995; Sung & Choi, 2014; Amin et al., 2014). It also shows a lack of communication, which means that sometimes practice may not be conveniently disclosed and explained, resulting in misinterpretation, insufficient feedback, and communication deficits in physical, relational, and temporal contexts (Pereira & Gomes, 2012).

In the context of the interviews, the actors were asked to put themselves in the shoes of the HR manager and propose practices and activities that they considered interesting for people and that they believed would contribute to organizational performance. In general, the response is saturated in terms of recognizing that the company's HRM already conducts various activities; responses also recognized that besides the development of practices and activities, it is equally important, or perhaps more so, for these activities to be presented properly, since it is very common, according to the analysis of data, for *people not to know what has been or is being done* (Subj. undifferentiated administrative collaborator) (cf. Pereira & Gomes, 2012). This handicap poses a challenge for marketing development and adequate internal communication by HRM protagonists. Such ignorance hinders the possibility of adopting strategies that help to enhance the effect of communication in the organizational context and reflect it in added value to the organization and to the link between HRM and performance, particularly in terms of activity indicators (Pereira & Gomes, 2012; Sirca et al., 2013; Sung & Choi, 2014). As for the practical exercise of proposing new activities, it was considered by different organizational actors as a difficult and complex operation (147 references in 225 possible).

This kind of result leads us to reflect on the need to make a contextualized and properly aligned HRM, both in terms of the vertical alignment between the activities and strategies of HRM and the general strategies of the organization, and of the horizontal alignment at the level of consistency between different policies, practices, and techniques among themselves (Stavrou et al., 2010). However, a recurring analysis of the data also allows us to infer and reflect on the need for a strategic and operational alignment so that the two processes are not perceived as disconnected from each other. In the words of a participant:

there is no use in having great strategies if there are no mechanisms and operational skills to implement the strategies and the reverse does not have great results either, just look at the country and see the

amount of energy, the money wasted on things that were not subject to the minimum planning. (Subj. technical collaborator)

Finally, it is also necessary to have a communication and relational alignment that fosters empathy and organizational trust and that enhances mutual knowledge of the roles and expectations associated with them by different actors (cf. Prowse & Prowse, 2010; Sirca et al., 2013). In the words of a participant:

it is crucial that people have a sense of their role in the organization and the roles of others to make things work better. The relationship between people and groups is very important so as to solve problems and optimize practices and procedures, which are fundamental in the field of HRM. It is not easy to want to do things alone. How will a director of HRM that is isolated implement, influence, and show its relevance? We need him, for me he is a fundamental colleague, but he needs everyone, at least I think so. (Subj. managers' peer) (155 participants expressed the same idea)

A second area or dimension in this relationship between HRM and OP saturated categories on the question of HRM indicators and metrics. From the domains resulting from data analysis, an initial conclusion has to do with the importance that the majority of respondents from the different companies attribute to the existence of indicators and metrics as a tangible way to assign value to each of the areas of management.

This perspective emphasizes the relevance of indicators and metrics of a quantitative nature at the expense of qualitative indicators, assuming that qualitative is synonymous with subjective and partial. The trend revealed in the data analysis is that, in HRM, indicators are excessively qualitative, and that subjectivity and partiality contribute to *creating injustices that, in this area of management, can cause major damage* (Subj. undifferentiated operational collaborator) and that prove to be useless because *what is understood by a person can be totally different for someone else, even if they are side by side in the company* (Subj. line manager).

Data analysis in relation to the indicators and their relation to performance reveals that respondents attach importance to these elements, but it is not uncommon to hear in interviews: *we can only improve what we can measure* (Subj. Administrator). This expression reveals a positioning that overstates the quantitative compared to the qualitative indicators although participants assume that managing human resources is a huge responsibility and a very difficult task, because of the subjectivity

inherent in people and because *people are the only resource impossible to copy and imitate and are an invaluable asset, hence the importance that people have in the intangible capital. Now it is a fashion, but here in this company it has been a reality since its foundation* (Subj. administrator in a family company) (cf. Gates & Langevin, 2010; Buller & McEvoy, 2012; Dulebohn & Johnson, 2013).

What can be expected from HRM? More than one value, singular and objective, a comprehensive system that can range from responsibilities of a bureaucratic nature to responsibilities of a global and inclusive nature; knowledge and expertise to make decisions based on quality and authority over the position held; development and consolidation of strategic and supportive partnerships in which participation and the genuine involvement of top management can contribute to a greater credibility of the function and its responsibilities, enhancing a real and perceived contribution to the organization as a whole (Maxwell & Watson, 2006; Barés & Cornolti, 2006; Dolan et al., 2010; Khan & Khan, 2011; Boon et al., 2011; Sirca et al., 2013; Barrick et al., 2015).

As a summary all these aspects, both analyzed in the literature review and in the empirical study, are integrated in Figure 4.1, as follows:

10 Conclusion

The globalization process that started in the 1980s, and some of its expressions, such as the deregulation of markets, the relocation of the economy, increased competitiveness, and increasing pressure to achieve results, has created a very focused interest on each of the areas of management of an organization in order to analyze its contribution to the final performance.

The data analysis conducted and the conclusions presented throughout the chapter highlight the specific nature of HRM and, given the resources that it involves, allow us to foresee that one of the strategies that this area of management may assume is to adopt an alignment of different dimensions, without losing its specificities. This will give HRM a strategic distinctiveness, and can constitute a competitive advantage for the organization in operational terms. In order to enhance OP, it is essential to prepare HRM to address new issues and new challenges, and to reformulate classical issues for new contexts and circumstance, without losing the true sense of the multiple roles that it may assume, particularly the ones of strategic partner and change agent.

At a time marked by constant technological evolution that pervades all areas, with the numerous advantages and complications which

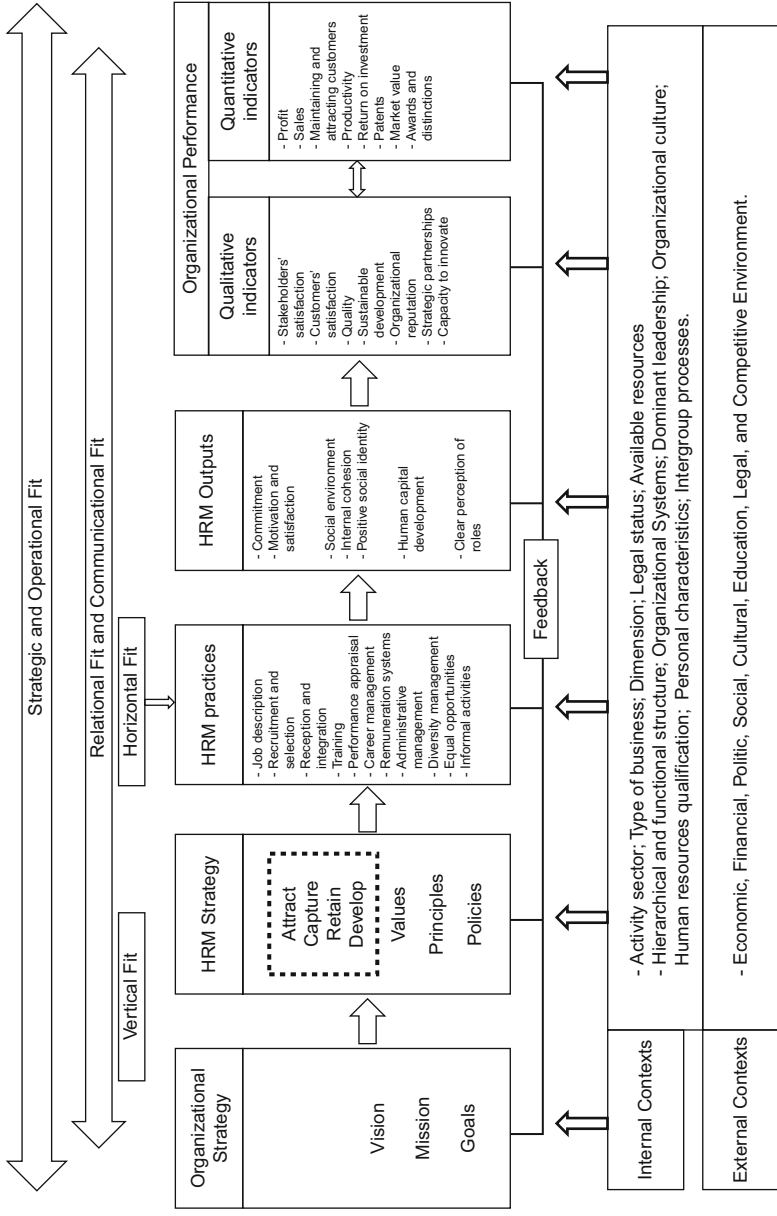


Figure 4.1 From HRM practices to organizational performance

emerge, HRM should, in this scenario, take advantage of technological developments, while at the same time preserving the importance of the individual organization's context.

Despite an often obsessive pressure for results at all costs, it was also possible to obtain perceptions of valuation processes to ensure greater sustained development in organizational terms. A reflection on the processes allows us to enhance the perception of how to get a good result, and leads to a better understanding of the reason for poor results.

The perception that prevails in relation to the expected results of HRM and its connection with OP is that they are subjective and based on subjective criteria and methodologies. However, the analysis of the interviews shows that if there is already some awareness that the qualitative can be as important as the quantitative, it is also true that *a light breeze pressing to obtain results at any price* (Subj. Administrator) can lead to a more vehement and incisive speech on the need for HRM to have more objective data and performance results and possess quantitative criteria for analysis and evaluation.

HRM is presented as an open management area with a large intervention field that should assume a role that in some situations will necessarily be reactive for the sake of efficiency, and at other moments proactive for the sake of strategy, and in other situations it will be active as a matter of reality. It is in the daily confrontation with the dynamic reality that HRM will have the best playing field to reveal its value and contribute to sustainable and integrated development of the organization, and the people who integrate and contribute to its identity and to its role in the broader and global environment in which it operates.

Notes

1. The inclusion of quantitative references in the analysis of the results aimed only to classify the degree of saturation reached in the different types of data.
2. The references do not include the responses of HR managers or collaborators belonging to HR departments, as they consider that there is already a very reasonable number of quantitative indicators, not only in areas of a more administrative nature, but also in areas focused on the development of people.
3. Disaggregated as follows: 24 administrators, 25 managers' peers, three technical collaborators, six undifferentiated operational collaborators, and four undifferentiated administrative collaborators.
4. Three multinational companies, three national (Portuguese) companies, and two family companies.

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