

Does HRM Context Matter?

The issue of the role and impact of context on human resource management has been a research subject for three decades. One of the first articles examining the relationship between context and human resource management was “Understanding Human Resource Management in the Context of Organizations and Their Environments,” which was co-authored by Jackson and Schuler (1995). In this article, the authors defined three main components of human resource management: specific human resource practices, formal human resource policies, and overarching human resource philosophies (which specify the values that form an organization’s policies and practices). All of these are strongly influenced by both external and internal contextual factors. The following were identified among internal contextual factors: technology, structure, size, organizational life cycle stage, and business strategy. External factors include: legal, social, and political environments as well as unionization, labor market conditions, industry characteristics, and national cultures. Moreover, these external factors should be investigated on the local, national as well as international levels (Jackson and Schuler, 1995). On the basis of the developed model, the authors argue that the research conducted in the field of human resource management should include a more structured and detailed investigation of interrelations between actions undertaken by particular organizations and the context in which they operate.

However, it should be mentioned that the variety and complexity of the research conducted in the field of human resource management, the availability of diverse sources of information, and the development of the “big data” stream in science, caused a part of the research to concentrate on finding the best practices of human resource management. The main aim of this research was to find practices and

solutions that could be applied in organizations operating in diverse contexts. This research was conducted within the “universalistic approach,” according to which, by analyzing a sufficient amount of data, the best practices applicable to the majority of organizations and contexts that can bring about an expected level of effectiveness can be defined (Child, Faulkner, and Pitkethley, 2001; Beer, Boselie, and Brewster, 2015).

In opposition, the “situational approach” was developed. It assumes that it is impossible to define common and generally applicable human resource management practices and standards as every organization is an open system and is influenced by a set of diverse factors. Thus, in this approach context is of major significance. In research conducted in line with the situational approach, of greatest importance was the precise defining of factors that may influence the scope and specificity of actions undertaken in human resource management. Additionally, in recently published articles, various groups of stakeholders seem to have a significant impact upon implemented human resource management practices and policies. An example of such an approach is presented in articles authored by Farndale and Paauwe (Pauwee and Farndale, 2017; Farndale and Paauwe, 2018). In their model, both external and internal factors are included. However, they also discuss the impact of the expectations of diverse groups of stakeholders. In this model contextual factors are divided into five groups: (1) competitive mechanisms (that encapsulate how a firm positions itself in the marketplace based on its products or services, competitors on the market, and technology); (2) institutional mechanisms (based on prevailing social, political, cultural, legal, and regulatory aspects of the environment in which the firm operates); (3) heritage mechanisms (including outcomes of past strategic choices interacting with the organizational structure and culture); (4) organizational capabilities (efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility, quality, innovation, and speed); and (5) legitimacy (legislative compliance, fairness with regard to work, time, money, know-how, and participation). All these factors create a landscape that shapes human resource management policies and practices. However, the outcomes of the application of particular activities should be evaluated through the lens of firm effectiveness, employee well-being, and societal well-being.

The differences between the *universalistic* and *situational approaches* can be narrowed down to finding the answer to the question of whether the “best practice” or “best fit” approach is more beneficial for organizations (Veld, 2017), or whether one should concentrate on divergent or convergent processes (Goderham, Morley, Brewster, and Mayrhofer, 2004; Brewster and Mayrhofer, 2012, Mayrhofer et al., 2019). Nevertheless, on the basis of conducted consideration it can be stated that the context of human resource management is crucial for both theory and practice.

As context is specific, not common to every organization, one cannot perceive it as a stable, unchangeable element that does not impact upon organization functioning. Thus, it can be concluded that searching for solutions in the field of human resource management that are the best fit to both the contextual factors and stakeholder expectations is crucial in accomplishing expected organizational goals.

The sixth issue of the *Human Resource Management (Zarządzanie Zasobami Ludzkimi)* journal contains scientific articles that refer to various approaches and practices of human resource management where context is perceived as a primary factor impacting upon their shape. The key assumption made, when preparing the concept of this issue, was that human resource management is always determined by a set of both external and internal factors that impact upon particular HR practices (e.g., those referring to employment, remuneration, or employee development) and also define general policies regarding employment issues in organizations (Farnham, 2017). The above-mentioned factors determining the approaches and policies of human resource management do not constitute a finite list. They indicate that investigating and interpreting the actions applied in organizations is very complex and difficult (Markoulli et al., 2017). Thus, this complexity imposes the use of diverse methods and research tools on scientists in their projects, and provides a detailed description of the sample and its context. Moreover, researchers should conduct an in-depth discussion on the level of applicability of research findings in other organizations that operate in different contexts (Madden et al., 2017).

The articles included in this issue, refer to various aspects of the human resource management context. They are aimed at shedding light on both the complexity of the context and the way the context of human resource management can be investigated.

The opening article of this Issue, entitled “**HRM Context in Practice and Scientific Research**” (2019), is authored by Aleksy Poczowski. The essence of human resource management context and its division are presented in the first part of the text. This is followed by discussions of contextual aspects most often appearing in Polish publications after the year 2000. These include the transformation of the socioeconomic system, internationalization and globalization, the development of the knowledge-based economy and companies, new organizational and legal forms of providing work, diversity in human resources, and the industry-specifics of an organization. On the basis of these considerations, the author draws a conclusion according to which contextual issues are present in research into HRM, but they often constitute only overall background characteristics and are not the focal point of the research. Thus, the context of HRM should merit more attention on the part of scientists and the scope of the research should be expanded to allow for the

analysis of dependencies between contextual factors and the policies and practices of human resource management.

The second article, “**Labor Force Ageing as a Manifestation of Changes in the Demographic Context of HRM,**” authored by Bogusława Urbaniak (2019), focuses on demographic factors as one of the key external determinants impacting upon human resource management. The main aim of the paper is to present how the workforce aging process may determine an organization’s decisions on employment. The issues raised by the author include the dynamic changes in the structure of the workforce, particularly in the group of immobile workers, who are not willing to migrate or change their occupational profile. Secondary data analysis was used in the article. It was enriched by the results of qualitative research conducted among SME employers who participated in the STAY project, which was conducted between 2016 and 2019, and was cofinanced by the EU funds.

The next article, entitled “**Context of Knowledge-Based Work and HRM in the Narratives of Employees from the KIBS Sector: Discourse Analysis,**” authored by Agnieszka Wojtczuk–Turek and Dariusz Turek (2019), analyzes working conditions in organizations operating in the KIBS sector (the knowledge-intensive business services sector). In the research, data obtained through individual interviews as well as from focus groups were used. Key findings show that including customer expectations and focusing on providing customers with expected outcomes create specific working conditions that might be challenging for effective human resource management.

In “**The Context of Managing Inpatriation: Institutional Distance and Relationship between a Foreign Subsidiary and the Headquarters of an MNC**” (2019), Joanna Purgal–Popiela discusses the nature of the relationship between a subsidiary and the head office as well as the way this relationship affects the level and importance of the employee flow between them (including inpatriation). The role of the external, institutional context in setting up cooperation conditions is also analyzed in the article. Based on the research conducted, four scenarios for inpatriation, corresponding to the relationship between subsidiary and the head office to institutional distance, are presented.

The last paper, “**Values Integrating Generations in the Workplace**” by Marta Młokosiewicz, is focused on the issue of multi-generation workforce cooperation in organizations. The importance of the topic stems from the fact that four generations of employees coexist in many organizations. Thus, it is crucial not only to identify differences among them, but above all, similarities, in order to make use of what connects them in overcoming potential difficulties in cooperation. Secondary data analysis, contained in the current literature on the subject and available reports

by consulting companies, was applied in the research. As a result, five categories of values were identified.

In this issue of the journal, a review of the book *Macro Talent Management: A Global Perspective on Managing Talent in Developed Markets*, edited by Vlad Vaiman, Paul Sparrow, Randall Schuler, and David G. Collings, is also included. The main focus of the book is to analyze contextual factors that create conditions for talent management at the national level. In particular chapters, the specificity of political, educational, labor, social and cultural, and economic systems as well as any other factors that determine and shape approaches to talent and talent management are discussed. Thus, the content of the book is of the highest relevance to the issue's main theme.

The above-mentioned articles prove the importance of context in research on human resource management. They cover diversity in practices (employment, creating working conditions, expatriation and inpatriation, and building engagement), external factors (demographic changes, institutional environment, and range of business), internal factors (processes applied and structures) as well as stakeholder expectations (society, generations, customers, and employees). Additionally, a variety of research methods was applied in the articles included in the issue. They encompass statistical analysis, discourse analysis, and interviews and focus groups. Thus, we believe that these articles will be of high value for both the researcher and practitioner who is interested in human resource management.

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