

HR and the Implementation of High-Performance Work Practices: Tactics That Work March 2019



Studies consistently show that bundles of High Performance Work Practices (HPWPs) can and often do contribute to the achievement of a number of positive organizational outcomes including higher productivity, better quality, improved customer service, and enhanced revenues and profits. At the same time, evidence suggests that the HPWPs concept is only slowly diffusing across companies both in the U.S. and abroad. Why is this? Better still, what can HR managers do to close this gap and, thus, better serve their organizations?

A study by Michel Hermans, a recent graduate of the ILR School's PhD program, addresses these questions by identifying the activities that HR organizations worldwide have used to foster the successful adoption of HPWPs in their firms. The study used data obtained from a global survey – the Human Resource Competency Study (HRCS) conducted in collaboration with Dr. Dave Ulrich and the staff at the RBL Group – that ultimately involved 274 business units, primarily in manufacturing and services. Respondents included 6,019 HR managers and 3,603 line managers.

Not surprisingly, organizations most frequently adopted HPWPs when their HR functions exerted a particularly strong influence (*vis-à-vis* other staff functions) on strategic decision-making. This influence, which was widely acknowledged by line managers in their organizations, emanated from a series of integrated actions conducted over time (versus, for example, the exercise of formal authority or control).

The influential HR functions gained their credibility by establishing a reputation for being excellent at the basics of their craft, primarily by successfully outsourcing non-critical activities and using data (scorecards) to validate and communicate the business impact of their in-house initiatives. They fostered a receptive organizational context for the implementation of HPWPs among line managers over time by bringing them in on the design of HR activities and providing real-time support during the implementation of these activities. Also, they cemented their strategic bona fides by proactively seeking opportunities to interact with executives and board members to stay abreast of key business issues to assure – and to reassure these key decision-makers – that their HR strategies were closely aligned with business needs.

In sum, the results of this study suggest that the implementation of HPWPs was not merely a matter of rational choice; i.e., of HR functions developing a well-designed system and then relying on extant research results to sell the concept throughout their organizations. It also took credibility and influence, which HR functions carefully nurtured over time by not only being good at what they did, but also assuring that key players in their organizations knew they were good at what they did. The latter took them into the arena of impression management, the deliberate use of data and interpersonal relationships with key decision-makers to foster the functional credibility, organizational receptivity, and top management support it takes to garner acceptance for and then successfully launch a major HR initiative.

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