

Best Practices for Building High Performance in Human Resource Management

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Human resource (HR) professionals have long realized the value of learning from the experiences of other leading organizations—that taking a best practices approach to the HR function can drive the high performance necessary to survive and thrive in a competitive market. An overview of recent studies concerning best practices points to the effectiveness of these approaches in human resource management: providing job security, offering job rotations to stellar performers, providing ongoing training to develop employees' skills, conducting developmental performance appraisals, sharing information and knowledge, providing career opportunities, fostering employee participation, and using performance-based incentives to reward employees. The application of these and other HR-oriented best practices that complement an organization's mission, strategy, and culture can help it achieve its objectives while enhancing its reputation. ©2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Today's business leaders understand that human resource management (HRM) can have a positive influence on the company's bottom line. A looming challenge, however, is the extent to which HRM is prepared to assume a larger role in the organization's business strategy and contribute to informed decisions about business growth. Pfeffer (1998a) maintains that companies' success in hypercompetitive markets depends less on the advantages of economies of scale, technology, and access to capital, and more on innovation, speed, and adaptability, and that these competitive advantages come largely from human resources.

Organizations can learn not only from their own experience but also from others. They can look to competitors, customers, suppliers, and other business actors for inspiration to improve their operations, including ways to develop their human resource. The business press and consultancies disseminate management concepts, or best practices, for firms to take up, and there are several good reasons why managers and HR directors take an interest in introducing such practices developed by others. The notion of best practices implies that organizations can pick and choose predefined tools and blueprints in performing HR development within the firm, and that firms can reap the advantages of closely imitating others (Lervik, Hennestand, Amdam, Lunnan, & Nilsen, 2005).

Competing in today's tumultuous global economy presents additional challenges to the human resource function in creating the expected value to foster and sustain competitive advantages. To function effectively, HR professionals must master the necessary competencies, including mastery of HR knowledge (Long, 2008).

Defining High-Performance Management and Best Practices

The concept of high-performance management systems has arisen out of a desire on the part of some practitioners to broaden the focus away from employees' attitudes and commitment, so that such factors as skill formation, work structuring, performance management, and pay satisfaction are included in the list of mechanisms through which HR practices may affect performance. Hence,

high-performance management is not just associated with high-commitment management. Taken to its extreme, it calls for management in which high performance is targeted directly, not indirectly via attitudinal structuring. Its core would be the use of performance management methods that are centered on the setting of goals and the linking of pay to their achievement (Wood, 1999). High-performance management can be considered a machine for driving high commitment to and involvement in efforts to resolve organizational problems.

Delery and Shaw (2001) posit that functional interdependence makes it useful to extend high performance in HRM to all jobs in the company, as the success of employees in strategic jobs depends on the good performance of others. Bamberger and Meshoulam (2000) noted that research in strategic human resource management has adopted either a resource-based or a control-based approach to the measurement of high-performance HR practices. The resource-based approach describes the extent to which a measure of practices taps the internal development of employees, such as training and broad career path (Delery & Doty, 1996).

External fit focuses on the alignment between the organization's business strategy and human resource practices, while internal fit focuses on an integrated set or synergistic combination of HRM practices that are implemented in a coherent and consistent manner.

High-performance human resource practices, such as the provision of job security, extensive skills training, promotion from within, results-oriented appraisal, and broad career paths, signal an organization's intention to establish a long-term exchange relationship with its employees. High-performance human resource practices foster employees' shared perceptions of a supportive organizational environ-

ment that motivates discretionary behaviors that contribute to organizational performance. These discretionary behaviors have typically been conceptualized in terms of organizational citizenship behavior, a class of discretionary behaviors that help maintain and enhance the social and psychological context that supports task performance. As a strategy for managing the employment relationship, high-performance human resource practices constitute an organization's inducements that, by satisfying employee goals, foster the perception of the work environment as being supportive (Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007).

The universal, or best practice, approach proposes that high-performance management works in all contexts because organizations are facing a similar environment (Arthur, 1994; Delaney & Huselid, 1996; Huselid, 1995; Legge, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995). The contingency, or strategic human resource management (SHRM), approach argues that organizations with external and internal fit will attain higher performance (Miles & Snow, 1984; Schuler & Jackson, 1987). External fit focuses on the alignment between the organization's business strategy and human resource practices, while internal fit focuses on an integrated set or synergistic combination of HRM practices that are implemented in a coherent and consistent manner (Delery & Doty, 1996; Guest, 1987; MacDuffie, 1995).

The Eight Best Practices in Human Resource Management

Organizations that seek to build high performance in HRM practices:

- Provide job security,
- Offer job rotations to high performers,
- Provide ongoing training to develop employees' skills,
- Conduct developmental performance appraisals,
- Share information and knowledge,
- Provide career opportunities,

- Foster employee participation, and
- Use performance-based incentives to reward employees.

Job Security Leads to Employee Satisfaction

In considering the nature of employment relationships, one consistently cited important component is the extent to which employees perceive their organization as willing to provide long-term job security. Among knowledge workers, job security may be especially crucial. Given the rapid advancements in information technology in an increasingly volatile, competitive environment, outsourcing knowledge-related services—particularly those in information technology (IT)—has become a vital strategy for many organizations (Ang & Slaughter, 2001; Clark, Zmud, & McCray, 1998; Loh & Venkatraman, 1992).

Having a sense of job security also enables employees to maintain a balance in the employment relationship, which employees tend to prefer (Shore & Barksdale, 1998). Moreover, the perception that the employer has provided prospects for greater job security represents a broader horizon against which to build a history of inducements and contributions—a prerequisite for stable social exchange (Blau, 1964).

Along with job security, job satisfaction is essential for improving performance. Modern work practices might lead to a greater “intensification” of work (Green, 2004), which could lower job satisfaction. Marmot et al. (1991) found that one’s position in the job correlates with particular socioeconomic characteristics. We examined whether a positive impact of modern job design on job satisfaction is independent from observed worker characteristics and found that the effect is traced back just to the job design rather than to the worker characteristics. When Fahr (2010) studied job design and job satisfaction, it appeared that there was a higher level of job satisfaction among workers considered unsuited for the job in terms of socioeconomic characteristics than among workers who were suited for the job design.

This indicates that the defining characteristics for enriched job design affect job satisfaction independently from the actual design of the job.

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For example, Kambayashi and Kato (2011) studied the changes in long-term employment and job security over the past 25 years, in particular during Japan’s “Lost Decade,” which corresponded to the greatest economic expansion in US history. They found that in spite of the prolonged economic stagnation in Japan, the ten-year job retention rates of core employees (those age 30 to 44 who had at least five years of tenure) were remarkably stable, at around 70 percent, and that there was little evidence of any deleterious effect on job stability among those core employees. In contrast, despite the US economic expansion during that same period, the comparable job retention rates for core employees in the United States fell from more than 50 percent to below 40 percent.

Job Rotations Encourage Stellar Performance

Job rotation is another best practice that HR can employ to contribute to the company’s business strategy. From a development perspective, some talent managers advocate the idea of rotations—having HR spend time with business units in China, for example, or working in operations or in accounting—to encourage the acquisition of new skills (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011).

In organizations that practice total quality management (TQM), HRM units develop policies and procedures to ensure that employees can perform multiple roles (as the result of cross-training and

membership on cross-functional work teams), improvise when necessary, and direct themselves in the continuous improvement of product quality and customer service (Blackburn & Rosen, 1993). Zandy (2010) suggests that one of the development actions that can result in a TQM environment is a rotational program that allows employees to move into other parts of the company that would be more amenable to and consistent with their backgrounds and skills. One firm called such a program “Creating Better Fit” and, as its name implies, the objective was to better align employees with available positions. If, for some reason, a proper fit could not be achieved, the company would help those affected access another place in the organization. The purpose of this needs-driven program was to transform the firm from a system engineering-oriented organization to one that was focused on its market.

In his study of high-performance workplace organizations, Bauer (2004) found that these innovative organizations provide nonmanagerial employees with the opportunity to participate in decision making, work in self-managed teams, enhance their skills through job rotation, and have autonomy over the way they perform their tasks. Furthermore, these practices are associated with a higher level of communication with coworkers, employees outside the work groups, and customers. Employees typically value these new opportunities, which leads to a direct increase in overall job satisfaction.

Developing Employees’ Skills Through Training and Development

Training efforts usually focus on general information, such as company policies and procedures, or are used as a remedial activity aimed at correcting skill deficiencies, not as a method for driving superior performance. Some companies conduct assessments of HR staff competency to understand employees’ strengths and weaknesses. “Then they create formal training programs or development plans to bring up knowledge levels across the board,” one HR manager said. “It doesn’t have to be

expensive, but they need to commit to do it” (Bontis, 2001).

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Training refers to some activities that equip employees with needed skills to perform better in their current jobs (Li, Qian, Liao, & Chu, 2008). New technologies and other innovations are needed to cope with the pressures of a competitive business arena, while employees are required to learn new knowledge and skills for performing their tasks and jobs with quality. Tai (2006) asserts that training and development plays a crucial role in increasing work adaptability, ability, and flexibility, and in maintaining necessary competence and motivating employees. Thus, this variable influences employee productivity (Zohurul & Sununta, 2010). Various organizations have noted that training:

- Provides a reward to employees,
- Improves employees’ technical skills,
- Improves employees’ interpersonal skills,
- Remedies employees’ poor performance,
- Prepares employees for future job assignments,
- Builds teamwork within the company,
- Provides substantial initial instruction,
- Helps employees understand the business (for example, its competitors and needed technologies),
- Imparts knowledge across various disciplines, and
- Teaches company values.

Moreover, Drost, Frayne, Lowe, and Geringer (2002) found that training practices helped companies develop employees who were high performing, satisfied with their jobs, and made a positive contribution to the overall effectiveness of the organization. In addition, training and development practices

can promote entrepreneurial behavior to the extent that they are applicable to a broad range of job situations and encourage high employee participation (Maidique & Hayes, 1984). The training program may also include an attitudinal component, wherein acceptance of change, a willingness to take risks and assume responsibility, and the value of teamwork and shared achievements are central themes, and should be customized and career oriented, with high levels of employee participation. Training also represents an effective venue for giving employees an appreciation of cooperative behaviors and cross-functional perspectives (Morris & Jones, 1993). Finally, it also serves to empower employees. Hardly anyone arrives perfectly trained for a particular role. Training develops a productive workforce, which ultimately supports the success of the organization.

Training also can be used to reinforce the organization's focus on quality. At Cadillac, noted Blackburn and Rosen (1993), a training priorities committee determined the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities that employees would need to meet their organization's quality goals. Training programs were then customized to meet those needs at the individual, work unit, and divisional levels. Training in quality provided employees at every level with the tools needed to recognize faulty processes, identify problems, and evaluate and implement alternative solutions. It is important to note, however, that in such circumstances, employees must also be afforded the opportunity to use these new skills and to be recognized and rewarded for their actions. The greatest benefits of training in support of quality management have been found to come when there is a stronger emphasis on quality awareness and standards than on advanced quality methods (Becker & Huselid, 1998).

When considering their training needs, organizational leaders should bear in mind that traditional courses are not the only option. Other avenues for training include peer training, reading, coaching, and mentoring. Investing in one's human cap-

ital does yield a financial payback. For example, Motorola believes that it receives \$33 for every \$1 invested in its employee's education and training (Oliver, 2001). According to Kaliprasad (2006), keeping employees educated and developing them for future challenges has become the only sustainable competitive advantage.

Addressing the Need for Developmental Performance Appraisals

Thang (2004) has shown that employees' job performance depends on how well HRM-related decisions are made. Performance appraisal should be a continuous process, and not a once-a-year exercise. It is a formal system of periodically assessing and evaluating an individual's or team's job performance and providing feedback (Zohurul & Sununta, 2010). According to Levin (1986), performance appraisal can be used to assess employee training needs and merit, determine employee salary, generate feedback on past performance, and encourage further employee development.

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Organizations communicate performance expectations and reinforce desired employee behaviors through their performance appraisal and reward practices, both of which should be designed around specific criteria. To be effective, the evaluation of employees should include explicit measures of innovativeness and risk assumption, which implies some use of qualitative and subjective measures of performance (Morris & Jones, 1993).

The process of performance management, according to Mullins (1999), involves a continuous judgment on the behavior and performance of staff. It is important that employees know exactly what is

expected of them, and the yardstick by which their performance and results will be measured. A formalized and systematic appraisal scheme will enable a regular assessment of the individual's performance, highlight potential, and identify training and development needs. Most important, an effective appraisal scheme can improve the future performance of staff. The appraisal scheme can also form the basis for a review of financial rewards and planned career progression (Boohene & Asuinura, 2011).

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Enhancing Information and Knowledge Sharing

With the objective of enhanced organizational performance, many contemporary organizations have initiated knowledge management programs and related activities (Srikantaiah & Koenig, 2000) to enable the sharing (exchange) and integration of knowledge. Knowledge that is created in the mind of an individual is generally of little value to an enterprise unless it is shared. Organizations are rapidly learning that just because appropriate knowledge technology exists, knowledge will not necessarily flow freely throughout an organization (Small & Sage, 2005/2006). And people have to be provided with the information they need. Making information available at all levels increases employee motivation and also permits decisions to be made more quickly (Kaliprasad, 2006).

The knowledge management perspective emphasizes that information and communication technology interventions are the main means by which the sharing of knowledge is enhanced (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Ruggles, 1998). This perspective also views tacit knowledge as amenable to articulation through a knowledge repository. An emphasis on information and communication technology can result in

little attention being paid to broader social and organizational factors (Blackler, 1995; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; McDermott, 1999). Specifically, HR policies and practices typically remain unchanged (Hunter, Beaumont, & Lee, 2002). The implication of this is that sharing knowledge may be best embedded in work practices. In organizational learning terms, it is "situated" (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—that is, knowledge is shared in interactions as problems arise and solutions are discussed (Currie & Kerrin, 2003).

Small and Sage (2005/2006) describe the following interrelated factors as each contributing to successful knowledge sharing:

- *Business context.* The need for the business strategy to be communicated to employees.
- *Organizational structure and roles.* These serve to encourage knowledge sharing.
- *Organizational processes.* These should depend on the type and level of knowledge.
- *Organizational culture.* This has an impact on knowledge-sharing behavior.
- *Physical environment.* Quiet space and informal, relaxed physical environments enhanced by technology are helpful.
- *Direction.* Guidance given in the context of daily work processes is especially useful to knowledge workers.
- *Measurement.* Human performance measurement is becoming increasingly more important as knowledge-based organizations recognize that people are their greatest resource.
- *Means.* Organizations must provide these within the context of the various organizational performance attributes.
- *Ability.* Knowledge workers need training prior to job performance, knowledge support during job execution, and time to reflect on lessons learned to improve individual learning and to contribute to organizational learning.
- *Motivation.* Knowledge sharing is best supported by intrinsic rewards, such as work time saved,

useful and interesting dialogue, and professional pride in being recognized as an expert.

Technological innovation is the process of merging and reorganizing knowledge to generate new ideas. When companies innovate radically, they often need to manage with high uncertainty. Mumford (2000) noted that if companies emphasize outcomes too much, they will develop low-level technological innovation. Outcome control cannot be used efficiently to promote effective innovation in high-tech firms, for instance. A heavy emphasis on innovation outcomes can make managers and employees focus on possible losses, thereby leading them to abandon higher-risk innovations (Li, Zhao, & Liu, 2006).

The ability to retain employees depends significantly on the ability to manage them.

The Benefits of Creating Career Opportunities

Careers of managers and professionals in the twenty-first century cannot be managed the way they used to be. Training and development systems must be designed so that people are no longer promoted on the basis of their level, position, or status but, rather, on their actual or potential contribution to the firm (Hiltrop, 1999).

For each HR practice there exist design options that promote and reinforce different employee characteristics and behaviors (Schuler, 1986). Highly effective strategies to attract key staff to an organization include in-house career development and promotion opportunities and allowing employees to participate in key decisions and providing them with access to resources when required. Judicious HRM also can reduce staff turnover. The ability to retain employees depends significantly on the ability to manage them. Because capable people tend to be aware of the need to keep their

knowledge and skills current, they usually opt for a work environment that allows them learning opportunities while being employed (Kaliprasad, 2006).

In their study of HRM in China, Warner (2004) found the following components to be crucial to employee retention:

- Employee orientation and integration,
- Career planning and development,
- Employee relations and motivation,
- Performance management,
- Training and development,
- Transfer and promotions, and
- Compensation and benefit programs.

In organizations that practice TQM, career paths will include many horizontal moves to prepare managers for solving cross-functional problems and to provide them with a more holistic view of organizational issues. In years to come, we might expect a much greater emphasis on such career development strategies as job rotation, liaison assignments, and task force leadership. In addition, career development must emphasize opportunities for continuous learning and challenging entrepreneurial assignments (Blackburn & Rosen, 1993).

Fostering Employee Participation

Employee participation in the decision-making process will improve performance for two reasons. First, if employees possess more information about the procedures performed by the organization, they will be better able to identify and solve problems as soon as they arise. This will lead to an improvement in their own performance and the global performance of the firm (Pfeffer, 1998b; Wright, McComic, Sherman, & McMahan, 1999). Second, the sharing of information concerning financial performance, strategy, and operational measures conveys to the organization's members that they are trusted (Pfeffer, 1998b).

Participation includes a variety of practices, ranging from two-way communication programs, quality circles, autonomous teams, work councils, and joint consultative committees to full worker self-management, as well as profit sharing and employee share ownership schemes. These are distinct from the form of employee involvement in which employees as a group have no residual rights over the firm's surplus and no decision power, and where the extent of employee input is entirely subject to management discretion, such as with small-group or individual performance pay schemes and suggestion boxes or newsletter (Pérotin & Robinson, 2000).

Human resource policies that encourage worker involvement aim at providing employees with opportunities to have an input in decisions, and offer them incentives to extend discretionary effort and the means to acquire appropriate skills (Berg, 1999). Among these policies, participation schemes directly affect the first two aspects—opportunities and incentives—and, as a result, are thought to improve incentive to acquire skills as well as work organization and information flows. These effects combine to increase efficiency and productivity.

Rewarding Employees With Performance-Based Incentives

Bragg (2000) has identified six key principles for effective reward systems:

1. Rewards must support organizational goals and reward the behavior that you want repeated and helps the organization to succeed.
2. Rewards must be fair. Fairness, however, is in the eye of the beholder, and employee perceptions constitute their reality.
3. Rewards must promote cooperation, encourage teamwork, and aim for a win-win (where everyone who achieves a certain level of productivity is recognized and rewarded). Supporting players—

those who may work behind the scenes or support others' efforts—should not be forgotten.

4. Rewards must have a positive impact on performance, and reward programs should be considered short term. Since most programs lose their effectiveness quickly, they should be designed with an end date and be revised regularly.
5. Rewards must be effective in good times and bad, as they are valued differently during those times (for example, stock options are valued when share markets are doing well but may not be so highly valued if they are doing poorly).
6. Rewards must ultimately focus performance on serving the customer.

Gross and Nalbantian (2002) suggest that the process for developing a successful reward strategy involves creating more value by linking people practices to economic results—for example, operational, financial, and marketplace outcomes and bottom lines—and through careful statistical analysis of data. Their rewards framework consists of three main streams: pay, benefits, and careers.

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According to Campbell-Allen, Houston, and Mann (2008), rewarding and recognizing employee achievement can result in significant business results, changes in organizational culture, and staff satisfaction, including:

- Greater achievement of organizational and personal goals;
- Increased productivity, project completion, and revenues;

- Strengthening of relationships, increased appreciation of others, and greater teamwork;
- Development and strengthening of the organizational culture;
- Increased motivation and happier staff;
- Reduced turnover; and
- Enhanced marketplace reputation and branding (for example, it is easier to get and retain staff).

Reward strategies and the processes that are required to implement them have to flow from the business strategies. Therefore, the nature of the rewards program will be affected by the organization's business and HR strategies, the significance attached to reward matters by top management, and the internal and external environment. Armstrong (2006) further explains that the external environment includes the levels of pay in the labor market. He also submits that a reward system should consist of policies that provide guidelines on approaches to managing rewards, practices that provide financial and nonfinancial rewards, and processes concerned with evaluating the relative size of jobs (job evaluation) and assessing individual performance (performance management). A reward system should also consist of procedures to maintain the system so as to ensure that it operates efficiently and flexibly, and provides value for money. The reward strategy also should set out what the organization intends to do in the longer term to develop and implement reward policies, practices, and processes that will further the achievement of its business goals (Boohene & Asuinura, 2011).

To ensure that reward practices are properly and fairly managed, expectations must be clear, with employees having a good understanding of what is recognized, why, by whom, and when (Bragg, 2000). A highly effective performance management system that includes a reward strategy featuring goal setting and measurement that is simple for employees to understand and for staff to administer is key to assuring success.

A Call for Future Research

The results of the hard-won experiences of others, best practices can be an effective guide to improving organizational performance. Using them helps to create competency and to give the organization a competitive edge. Applying best practices can also add value to the organization in terms of image and reputation.

In addition to the eight best practices described in this article, there are several others related to management or HR development that can be used. Each director of HR should pick and choose which best practices to use depending on the company's mission, strategy, outlook, and culture. Future studies should analyze and benchmark the influence of HRM practices such as training programs to increase employees' performance or analyze and benchmark the virtuous relationship among employees' perceptions of career development opportunities, performance development, and personal investment in professional development. Moreover, further research should not only take HRM best practices as its unit of analysis but also investigate how and to what degree HRM practices become integrated in the organization.

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