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RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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CHAPTER 1

HIGH-INVOLVEMENT WORK PROCESSES AND SYSTEMS: A REVIEW OF THEORY, DISTRIBUTION, OUTCOMES, AND TENSIONS

Peter Boxall, Meng-Long Huo, Keith Macky
and Jonathan Winterton

ABSTRACT

High-involvement work processes (HIWPs) are associated with high levels of employee influence over the work process, such as high levels of control over how to handle individual job tasks or a high level of involvement at team or workplace level in designing work procedures. When implementations of HIWPs are accompanied by companion investments in human capital – for example, in better information and training, higher pay and stronger employee voice – it is appropriate to talk not only of HIWPs but of “high-involvement work systems” (HIWSs). This chapter reviews the theory and practice of HIWPs and HIWSs. Across a range of academic perspectives and societies, it has regularly been argued that steps to enhance employee involvement in decision-making create better opportunities to perform, better utilization of skill and human potential, and better employee motivation, leading, in turn, to various improvements in organizational and employee outcomes.

However, there are also costs to increased employee involvement and the authors review the important economic and sociopolitical contingencies that help to explain the incidence or distribution of HIWPs and HIWSs. The authors also review the

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research on the outcomes of higher employee involvement for firms and workers, discuss the quality of the research methods used, and consider the tensions with which the model is associated. This chapter concludes with an outline of the research agenda, envisaging an ongoing role for both quantitative and qualitative studies. Without ignoring the difficulties involved, the authors argue, from the societal perspective, that the high-involvement pathway should be considered one of the most important vectors available to improve the quality of work and employee well-being.

Keywords: High-involvement work processes; high-involvement work systems; worker participation; high-performance work systems; employee autonomy; job quality; employee well-being

High-involvement work processes (HIWPs) are concerned with the way in which people carry out their work in organizations. They are associated with high levels of employee influence over the work process, such as high levels of control over how to handle individual job tasks or a high level of involvement at team or workplace level in designing work procedures (e.g., Felstead & Gallie, 2004; Lawler, 1986). In such approaches, employees participate more fully in decision-making than is observed when work practices are heavily controlled by technologies, by bureaucratic rules or by managerial supervision. When implementations of HIWPs are accompanied by improved investments in human capital, such as better two-way communication, greater training and higher pay – we can talk not only of HIWPs but of “high-involvement work systems” (HIWSs). Fostering a high-involvement model of working is widely regarded as an important pathway to better workplace performance and employee well-being although these claims need careful assessment against the available evidence.

The goal of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on HIWPs/HIWSs. We begin by defining our terminology and then outline the evolution of this philosophy of working, both in terms of its industrial history and the intellectual traditions or theories that have argued a case for it. We then review the research on the contingencies that help to explain the distribution of HIWPs/HIWSs. Many theorists can marshal an argument in favor of higher employee involvement in decision-making but a key question we still face is this: if there is so much to gain, why is there not a greater uptake of such work systems? This leads into a section that reviews the evidence on the outcomes of HIWPs/HIWSs for firms and workers. In this section, we also review issues in research methods. We then present a section that summarizes and discusses key tensions associated with high-involvement working before we reach our final conclusions, including our claim that this model is one of the most important ways in which we can improve the quality of work and well-being in our societies.

HIWPs AND HIWSs: TERMINOLOGY

In defining what we mean, let us begin by locating HIWPs within the wider literature on human resource management (HRM) and employment relations. It helps

to contrast HIWPs with another commonplace term: that of “high-performance work systems” (HPWSs), a notion that originated in the United States, gaining prominence in the debate over the post-war decline of US manufacturing competitiveness. Cappelli and Neumark (2001) trace the term’s popularity to an influential public report, *America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990). The term was given significant impetus by Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg (2000), whose book, *Manufacturing Advantage: Why High-Performance Work Systems Pay Off*, generated major interest in how reforms in work organization could revive the fortunes of US manufacturing.

While the initial focus was on the way that production work is organized in manufacturing, the topic of HPWSs became part of a larger agenda concerned with human performance right across manufacturing and services, including in the public sector (e.g., Knies & Leisink, 2018; Leggat, Bartram, & Stanton, 2011). The term garnered wide appeal in the policy and practitioner communities and is deployed well beyond the United States. It is used in an analysis of workplace learning across countries and industries conducted for the International Labour Organization (Ashton & Sung, 2002). It is used in major studies of management practice in the European Union (EU) where there are concerns, similar to those in the United States, about how to simultaneously enhance business competitiveness and improve employee outcomes (e.g., Eurofound, 2013; Pot & Koningsveld, 2009). Similarly, it is popular in China, where the HPWS research stream involves large numbers of firms and focuses on both employee and organizational outcomes (e.g., Chang & Chen, 2011; Gong, Chang, & Cheung, 2010; Zhang & Morris, 2014).

However, definitional issues have dogged the notion of HPWSs from the outset (Boxall & Macky, 2009). As early as the mid-1990s, Becker and Gerhart (1996) illustrated the diversity of conceptions of the relevant HR practices involved in a table of five leading HPWS studies in the United States. These studies listed as many as 11 and as few as four practices, with no one practice common to all five and with some disagreement as to whether particular practices, such as performance-related pay, had positive or negative effects. What might be meant by the term only becomes more complex when we move from any one national context and recognize the significant variations in how HR practices are designed, understood, and implemented in different societies, regions, and cultures (e.g., Paaauwe & Boselie, 2003, 2007). Reviews and studies of HPWSs have regularly observed that “little consensus exists among researchers regarding the specific practices to be included in the configuration of high-performance human resource practices” (Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007, p. 558).

It is time to admit that this is neither surprising nor a problem over which we should be losing sleep. Two points ought to be clear. First, in every context, organizations need some suitable blend of HR practices to achieve any kind of performance (Boxall & Steeneveld, 1999). In order to survive and grow, every organization needs some kind of “human resourcing” process (Watson, 2005). It needs to bring people on board and manage them in some appropriate way in order to generate performances. This process is initiated by the founding

entrepreneur(s), whose actions ignite it. Second, what will be highly performing in each context is inevitably going to depend on a range of contingencies. As Kaufman and Miller (2011, p. 553) conclude from their empirical analysis of US firms: firms' choices of HR practices are "systematically linked to a variety of economic, technological, organizational, and management characteristics." Similarly, Stavrou, Brewster, and Charalambous (2010) identified 21 distinct bundles of HRM practices in the European private sector, with 10 of these related to business performance, while Chow, Huang, and Liu's (2008) study of 241 businesses in Guangzhou identified four distinct HR configurations predicting performance and employee turnover. In reality, with all the diversity and complexity of the organizational world, there can be no final determination of a set of highly performing HR practices – and it is time to stop lamenting the fact. We can, however, help managers to identify the principles that will assist them to develop a view of what will be highly performing in their particular context (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). The important task that should energize us as researchers is identifying which models of HRM emerge in which contexts, why they do so (i.e., which actors and contingencies help to shape them?), describing how they work (the "black box" problem), testing how they affect the outcomes of the parties and, finally, making arguments for how they might do so more effectively (Boxall, Purcell, & Wright, 2007).

With this mission in mind, our goal is to focus on one model of working that may lead to better outcomes: the high-involvement model, which connotes a philosophy or a theme in management action that fosters greater employee participation in workplace decision-making. High-involvement working can be defined as "an ongoing experience of high levels of influence over the decisions that affect the work process, identified through worker perceptions of their jobs and their working environment" (Boxall & Winterton, 2018, p. 30). The high-involvement pathway signifies a redistribution of decision-making about work practices inside organizations. Our main concern is with non-managerial workers who are employed in a production process of some kind, either making a product or serving a customer. For example, the high-involvement pathway could be applied to the decision-making powers of an operator in a manufacturing process, a retail assistant in a supermarket or an academic in a lecture room.

To be fair, a significant number of HPWS researchers have used the HPWS term to signify a high-involvement route to better performance. Most notably, Appelbaum et al. (2000, pp. 7, 39–40) envisage more empowering work design as the starting point for developing a high-performance system. They investigated its manifestation across three different kinds of manufacturing, including modular manufacturing in apparel where they measured a move away from management control of individualized tasks to teams of machinists working in a semi-autonomous way (Appelbaum et al., 2000, pp. 74–75). However, others simply adopted the approach of copying a preexisting list of practices in order to establish authority for a study, which is one well-worn path for getting through the review process at academic journals. For example, many have drawn on Huselid's (1995) list of 13 "high performance work practices (HPWPs)," itself a somewhat modified version of the items considered to represent "sophistication" in HRM by Delaney,

Lewin, and Ichniowski (1989). This list has the weight of high-cited work behind it but only has one item in the 9-item measure of “employee skills and organizational structures” ($\alpha = 0.67$) that might conceivably relate to high-involvement working (“What is the proportion of the workforce who participate in quality of work life programs, quality circles (QC) and/or labor-management participation teams?” (Huselid, 1995, p. 646). We cannot really say that a high aggregate score on this 9-item scale signifies a high-involvement workplace because a low score on the one relevant item may be swamped by higher scores on the others.

We consider that talking about a high-involvement model of working has two obvious virtues (Boxall & Macky, 2009). First, it is clearer what we mean. We mean a pathway to performance that involves a high degree of employee influence in work-related decisions, although we still need to take care with the degree of variety that this can imply within and across organizations, industries, and societies. The second virtue is that we are not assuming that the approach is “necessarily performance-enhancing” (Bryson, Forth, & Kirby, 2005, p. 460). Whether organizational performance is enhanced by implementing a HIWP has to be demonstrated in the specific context, not asserted in a generalized way. As far as management is concerned, the benefits of implementing higher involvement may not exceed the costs, as we will explore further in this review.

If we go down this road, a key issue is how we discern high-involvement working in practice. While some studies of the diffusion of participative practices rely on management reports (e.g., Osterman, 1994, 2000), like Vandenberg, Richardson, and Eastman (1999), we argue that the acid test is the level of influence that employees report based on their experience (Boxall & Macky, 2009; Boxall & Winterton, 2018). In the case of a complex practice such as teamwork, for example, how much worker control does management intend and how much is enacted? The risks of treating teamwork as a homogenous practice are shown in Gallie, Zhou, Felstead, and Green’s (2012) analysis of the British Skills Surveys, which describes the range from externally controlled to self-directed forms of teamwork and confirms that the benefits for learning and employee well-being are heavily weighted in favor of the latter (see also Felstead, Gallie, Green, & Zhou, 2010). The differential impact teams have on those that work within them has also long been recognized (e.g., Barker, 1993; Wright & Barker, 2000). Teamwork is actually very diverse: in what is envisaged for it, in how it is experienced, and in whether managers and workers find it appropriate to their circumstances.

Given the prevalence of this kind of issue, we use the term HIWP, or high-involvement working (Felstead & Gallie, 2004), to place the emphasis on how employees actually experience their work, irrespective of what managerial respondents say, or academics assume, about particular practices (Boxall & Winterton, 2018). In this view, high-involvement working is an ongoing experience of high levels of influence over the decisions that affect the work process, identified through individuals’ perceptions of their jobs and their working environment. Workers with a high level of influence feel highly empowered at work. For example, this may include influence over the nature of working methods or procedures, over issues of work scheduling, pacing, and sequencing, and over the criteria used to evaluate performance (Breugh, 1985; Gallie, Felstead, & Green, 2004).

Like Gallie et al. (2004), we distinguish between control or autonomy at the level of the individual's job and worker involvement in the design of the productive system in which their jobs are embedded. This is similar to the definitions developed by Wood, Van Veldhoven, Croon, and de Menezes (2012), who contrast involvement at the level of the role with involvement in wider organizational decision-making, and is reflected in the typology utilized by Eurofound (2013) and in the European research of Dhondt, Pot, and Kraan (2014). The distinction is important because worker control can be improved in some jobs without negative consequences for the performance or well-being of others while other jobs are deeply embedded in an interdependent productive system in which high levels of individual autonomy can be counter-productive (e.g., Langfred, 2005). Managers may use the two types of involvement in different combinations and for different purposes as the business context changes (e.g., Wood & Ogbonnaya, 2018). In what follows, the importance of distinguishing these two levels of involvement will become apparent, particularly when we discuss the controversy over the nature and impacts of lean production.

HIWPs AND HIWSs: EVOLUTION AND THEORY

The High-involvement Model in Industrial History

In terms of workplace history, talking of HIWPs signals a shift away from the low-involvement characteristics of the "industrial model" of HRM (Jacoby, 2004; Osterman, 1987), which was "characterised by jobs that are low in discretion, responsibility and scope and with workers subservient to a hierarchy of management authority" (Boxall & Purcell, 2016, p. 185). This model was fostered by the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was reinforced by the techniques of "scientific management" developed by Taylor (1911). Formal processes, such as "time-and-motion study," were used to investigate the informal methods workers had developed on the job, quantifying how long it took them to carry out their tasks and how they moved within the work space, interacting with materials, tools, and machines. Work procedures were then redesigned by a management expert to make human activities more efficient and to create a basis for identifying normal output and for linking pay incentives to higher levels of output. Henry Ford's contribution was to adopt the moving assembly line in conjunction with Taylorist work-study techniques.

It is wrong to suggest that Taylorist–Fordist practices permeated all manufacturing industries or all manufacturing jobs because craft production and craft work, in which qualified tradespeople or artisans exercised a high level of control, remained important (Burawoy, 1979; Littler, 1982). This was the case in small-scale industries, in highly specialized tasks within mass production (such as tool-making), and in highly mechanized industries with continuous-flow production in which workers with a strong capacity for problem-solving were needed to oversee complex processes (Blauner, 1964). However, much work in assembly-line industries, such as automobiles, became subject to a process of "de-skilling" or "work simplification" in which core operating jobs were reduced to executing a simple set of tasks that were constantly

repeated while the more important conceptual tasks were reserved to managers (e.g., Bélanger, Giles, & Murray, 2002; Clegg, 1984).

As capitalist economies expanded, Taylorist work practices spread into mass, standardized services, creating a “scripted model” of HRM (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Employee training in fast-food outlets, chain stores, supermarkets, contact centers, and cinema complexes, for example, often includes scripting in an attempt to ensure that customers are processed in a standard way. Front-line workers are required to follow a standardized set of steps in how they greet and sell services to a customer in a queue, much like an assembly line, as well as regulate and “act out” their emotions in prescribed ways when dealing with customers (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Managers use the scripted model of HRM to process large volumes of customers as rapidly and as consistently as possible, which enhances profitability. In this way, the scripted model of HRM mirrors the industrial model of HRM, and an equivalent of the manufacturing “speed-up” can occur, increasing stress levels and leading to high levels of employee turnover (Cordery & Parker, 2007; Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002).

HIWPs, then, represent an attempt to make a discernible shift in the locus of decision-making, unwinding Taylorist work design or returning greater workplace control to the production/service workforce (Boxall & Macky, 2009). They are not about an absolute shift in power, which is hardly likely, but about a relative shift in the balance of decision-making through decentralizing greater control over work practices to individual workers or teams. This shift can be manifested in a variety of ways but it should represent a reversal of the Taylorist drive to give managers power over the “thinking, coordinating, and controlling” processes in the workplace (Lawler, 1986, p. 6).

In terms of the stimulation to consider such reforms, the threat to Western manufacturing associated with Japanese production systems in the 1970s and 1980s is credited with forcing a rethinking of work organization in key industries (e.g., Appelbaum & Batt, 1994; Lawler, 1986; Piore & Sabel, 1984). Out of this rethinking, a reformed version of the industrial model of working emerged, one that places greater emphasis on tapping into the skills and underlying potential of production workers (i.e., “working smarter” rather than “working harder”). Such a model was seen as necessary to improve quality and the capacity to respond more flexibly to markets, including through higher levels of innovation in products and processes (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Greater employee involvement in decision-making is not, of course, likely to be the only way in which management responds to competitive pressure. Management moves to reform production systems have often started with investments in advanced technologies (Boyer, Keong Leong, Ward, & Krajewski, 1997; Challis, Samson, & Lawson, 2005). The combination of investments in new technologies *and* in related work practices and employee skills is often argued to bring the greatest productivity benefits (Black & Lynch, 2001; Brynjolfsson & Hitt, 2000).

The High-involvement Model: Theoretical Development

Various intellectual traditions have argued for this kind of empowering change at work, including the pioneering theorization of participative management in

the Wisconsin School of institutional economics, led by John Commons in the 1910–1920s (Kaufman, 2001). More recent influences include the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Oldham & Hackman, 2010) in which “job enrichment” through a process of enhancing autonomy (among other factors) is argued to foster employee motivation, learning, and satisfaction. These benefits of employee autonomy are also emphasized in the action theory of work psychology, which argues that greater control allows employees to develop strategies to deal with specific situations, helps people to develop their skills, and assists the general growth of the human personality (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Hacker, 2003). They are also central to the demand-control model of work strain (Karasek, 1979). According to Karasek and Theorell (1990), “high-strain jobs,” which combine low control and high pressure, have serious consequences for employee health, such as increased risk of cardiovascular disease, while “active jobs,” in which employees experience high demands but have a high level of control, foster learning and a better ability to cope with stress. The initiative to make jobs more active may come from management but can also emerge from workers through “job crafting,” the process through which individuals make adjustments to their work to enhance personal satisfaction and/or productivity (Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Employee control is increasingly understood as a type of job resource in the job demands-resources (JD-R) model of employee engagement and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Job demands require effort and incur psychological and physiological costs, while resources foster engagement and buffer the impact of demands on well-being. Where the resources available (e.g., in work autonomy, training, supervisor support) are overwhelmed by the demands of the job, negative employee outcomes such as stress, fatigue, and burnout can be expected.

Another vector to enhance employee involvement is to give greater power to a team of workers who then have greater control over their part of the production process, as in autonomous or semi-autonomous work groups, also known as self-managing or self-directed teams. This is emphasized in the theory of sociotechnical systems (STS), which developed from British studies of coalmining in the 1950s (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Trist, Higgin, Murray, & Pollock, 1963). STS models of work organization are concerned with jointly optimizing the technical and social systems of an organization. They encourage the growth of “responsible autonomy” (Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Winterton, 1994) through “minimal critical specification” of how work should be done (Cherns, 1976). The idea that managers and engineers have a degree of choice in designing technology and work organization was at the heart of STS design (Klein, 2014) and is central to the notion of “anthropocentric work,” in the sense of designing work fit for humans. Such work organization, in contrast to Taylorism, is conducive to greater worker autonomy and skill utilization (Winterton & Winterton, 1997). It creates a greater need for training and development and greater opportunities for them. Brödner (1990) suggested that the choice between anthropocentric and technocentric approaches hinges fundamentally on the extent to which work is designed to support or eliminate human skill, a