

Human Resource Management in Times of Change Developments and Challenges*

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Abstract

In the working world of the so called Fourth Industrial Revolution the competitiveness of companies depends to a high degree on the qualification, innovativeness and loyalty of its employees which makes Human Resource Management (HRM) a key factor for business success. The rapid change of social and economic conditions during the last years, create the need for a new perspective on HRM, which has not yet been scientifically examined to a profound extent.

This paper aims at displaying the evolution of Human Resource Management from its early beginnings in the last century to its current state. The significant impact of present societal developments on changes in HRM should be identified and critically viewed. To achieve the aspired aim a review of specialist and technical literature was conducted. The most powerful influences on HRM, that could be worked out, can be summarized as follows: digitalization, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), globalization, observance of diversity and the Covid-19 Pandemic. The results of the transformations on HRM seem ambivalent and cannot yet be finally evaluated.

As it refers to a limited literature data base the present study is primarily meant to set an impulse for further scientific investigation. Especially the final impacts of the ongoing pandemic have yet to be awaited.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Digitalization, Globalization, Pandemic

Introduction

“One machine can do the work of fifty ordinary man. No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man” (Hubbard, 1911). Elbert Hubbard, american writer and philosopher, living from 1856 to 1915, evidently had a foresighted view on the then dawning changes in economy and organizational structure anticipating the growing importance of employees for a company's success.

In contrast to this in the early industrial society, workers more or less were seen as an anonymous mass of easily replaceable members. Decisions were made top-down, initiatives of the staff were rather seen as disruptive factors. Constant control and peace work wages were exerted to foster productivity. The well-being of employees at the workplace did not play any role. It was the kind of work Karl Marx characterized as “alienated” in 1844 (Marx, 1844).

In the following 150 years working conditions were subject to continuous change through technological innovations : from steam engines to increasing automation, electrification , assembly lines, to the beginning of information technologies in the seventies of the last century.

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Along with this technological progress, the need for competent and well-trained employees was growing steadily and became an essential point of successful competition. Especially since economy entered the digital age in the third millennium, the so-called fourth industrial revolution, knowledge-based processes stand in the foreground and the performance of companies depends to a high degree on the intellectual work of smart and creative staff members.

In the course of these changes the field of personnel management gained more and more significance and turned from exclusively administrative tasks to broadly defined commissions even penetrating to the strategic core of organizations. These facts were considered in the new term Human Resource Management (HRM) that came from US to Europe in the mid-80' of the last century.

This article aims at giving a definition of HRM and its multiple tasks and on this basis point out current trends and developments which are to be integrated in the years to come.

Basic Facts on Human Resource Management

Definition

The term Human Resources (HR) was introduced by Peter Drucker, one of the most influential thinkers of modern management, in his fundamental work „The Practice of Management“ in 1954. Drucker differentiates three fields of action in organizations: Managing business, managing managers and managing workers and work. Human beings should be considered „as a resource, that is, as something having peculiar physiological properties, abilities and limitations that require the same amount of engineering attention as the properties of any other resource...“ (Drucker, 1954).

This point of view also was subjected to multiple criticism, because human beings are mentioned in the same breath as other resources like machines and materials which might open the door to economic exploitation (Osterby and Coster, 1992).

But DRUCKER continues : „It implies also consideration of the human resource as human beings, having, unlike any other resource ,personality, citizenship, control over whether they work, how much and how well and thus requiring motivation, participation, satisfactions, incentives and rewards.“(Drucker, 1954)

Over the years an endless number of HRM definitions were created which emphasize different aspects .

LADO and WILSON (1994) put a stress on the classic activities concerning the recruiting, developing and maintaining of employees.

„A human resource system is defined as a set of distinct but interrelated activities, functions and processes that are directed at attracting, developing and maintaining (or disposing of) human resources“.

Other definitions point out more strategic positions:

„HRM comprises a set of policies designed to maximize organizational integration, employee commitment, flexibility and quality of work“.(Armstrong, 2006)

According to WATSON (2010) „HRM is the managerial utilisation of the efforts, knowledge, capabilities and committed behaviours which people contribute to an authoritatively co-ordinated human enterprise as part of an employment exchange (or more temporary contractual arrangement) to carry out work tasks in a way which enables the enterprise to continue into the future.“

Positions in the HRM Profession

The HRM sector offers many different job possibilities. It has shown an above average growth in the last years and is expected to do so in the years to come (Noe, Raymond A., 2019, p 13).

Basically at the one hand there are HRM generalists creating concepts and managing the department. In smaller companies, generalists are in charge of all HRM tasks.

On the other hand in bigger organizations there are also HRM specialists on the executive level who are engaging in outlined sections e.g. training of the staff , corporate health management or advising employees in special situations. (Noe, Raymond A., 2019, p.15)

The HRM profession many times is considered as an interesting mixture of economic, strategical, legal, psychological, social

and ethical issues. But sometimes it can be hard to reconcile the different demands of the job and to know for whose interests you should be working primarily (Roper et al., 2015,p.1) „The hardest challenge of an HR is sometimes you have to be the lawyer, the judge and the hangman.“, as HRM expert HASSAN CHOUGARI is putting it (Hassan Choughari Quotes)

Fields of Work of HRM

Although most people associate HRM only with the act of hiring and the selection of potential applicants, it is present in almost all areas of a company. As written above the HR professionals manage a variety of interconnected processes throughout the whole of the organisation. Therefore, any employee is at some point in touch with the actions of human resource management, since he is a part of the organisations' human resources himself. Depending on his circumstances, he is involved with one or several specific lines of action, the human resource department provides.

According to MATHIS (2016) there can be distinguished three main lines of HRM work:

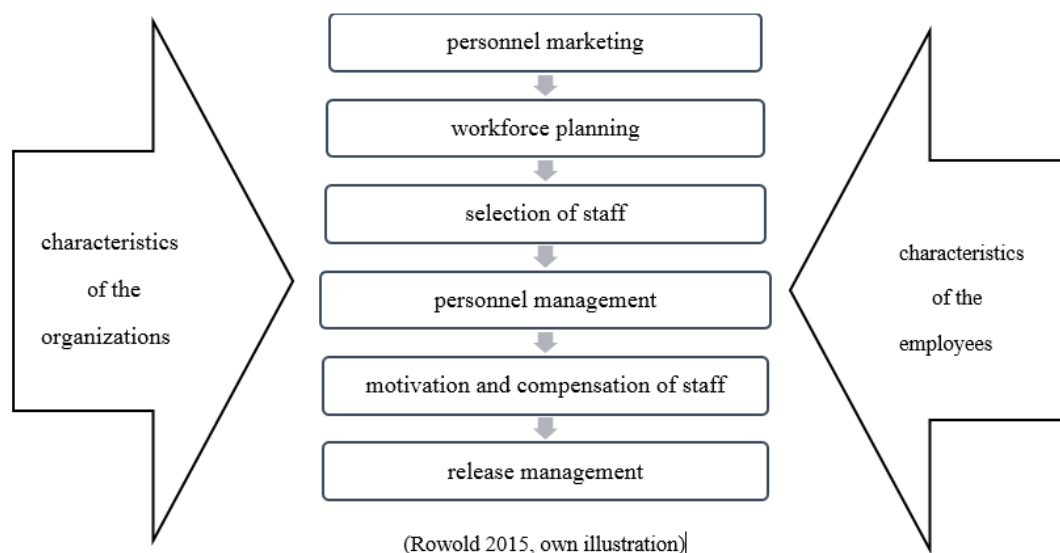
- administrative ,
- operational/ employee advocate and
- strategic.

In former times administrative tasks were predominant and confined to collection of the employees' data, payroll control and record keeping (ThiTe and Kavanagh, n.d.)

Later on, the HRM administration became more complex. For example, HRM had to integrate more and more legal regulations, especially employment laws, in the organization's personnel policy and contracts. There are to expect even more and more regulations in the years to come concerning e.g. discrimination, diversity, salaries and health care.

On the operational level, one core task of HRM of course is the adequate acquisition of staff. After determining if and how many jobs are vacant, the HRM professional has to define which qualifications or skills the candidate must possess. A common human resource method is to work out a requirement-analysis, by defining the actual specific tasks the employee has to perform at the position and then abstract these into general competences. This bottom-up method gives the manager a chance to analyse the required scope of work and actively translate it into a job description. Especially in a working environment, which is changing regularly, the requirement-analysis can provide an essential advantage, since it adopts this progress at its base and helps the company to make an adequate personnel-choice (Kanning, 2015).

The following illustration shows the HRM functions on the operational level, whereby each field of action is influenced by the specific characteristics of the organizations and the employees.



In order to capture the attention of potential applicants the organization has to offer an appealing impression to the public and to professionals. A possible way of presenting itself could be by using social media, such as LinkedIn, or through specific advertisements in print and electronic media. The classical way of advertising a job when it's vacant is not the current state of art, since it's shown to be more efficient, to constantly keep in touch with the different stakeholders of the concerning industry.

Therefore, 95 percent of German enterprises use social media as a marketing tool and a part of their recruitment strategy. (Petry et al., 2018)

The next step of recruiting is the staff selection out of the pool of appropriate applicants.

As part of Assessment Centres (AC), a variety of methods among them interviews, psychological testing, simulation tests, with group-oriented tasks and discussions is run through to identify the best candidate.

Studies have shown however that the validity of AC results is rather low and that improvements of the construction of ACs have to be discussed (Thornton III and Gibbons, 2009).

Once the organisations personnel requests are satisfied and employees are hired, each employee has to get detailed instruction and training on his job.

The constant fostering of each employee's potentials becomes a crucial task of the HRM. The employer has to offer courses, trainings and formation of different kinds to improve each one's individual skills, more exactly the skills the organization needs. At the same time the perspective of personal development can be a strong stimulus to keep motivation up.

Motivation of course is also dependent of satisfying working conditions like flexibility of working time and a sound work-life balance.

Not least, financial rewards like adequate payment, boni and participation in the success of the company are essential factors for the loyalty of an employee.

Furthermore, depending on the organisations current situation there can be the need to reduce the staff or reallocate it in a different location. Therefore, it is also the task of the Human resource management department to release the staff, which completes the life cycle employees experience in an organisation (Rowold, 2015).

The strategic role of HRM is partly identical with the above-mentioned operational tasks.

Acquiring, developing and retaining the right employees and thus reducing the turnover rate are valuable contributions to an organization's success.

Beyond HRM, expertise professionals should have a broad business know-how.

They should always have in mind an optimal cost-effectiveness of the measures taken. In most organizations personnel is a considerable cost factor, in production companies about 30 to 40 % , in service companies even 60 to 80% of total cost ("Personalkosten," n.d.).

It should also be considered to what extent staff could be replaced and reduced through technical improvement.

Also HRM often is involved in the area mergers and acquisitions and advises the head manager about the compatibility and the staff requirements of new business constellations (Mathis et al., 2016).

Current trends in HRM

Digitalization

The character of work is evolving quickly driven through digital transformation especially since the turn of millennium.

Rightly so digitalization is called a Mega Trend or Fourth Industrial Revolution. It is foreseeable that every business activity will be determined and depend on digital processes in the near future.

Physically hard and dangerous jobs will fall away; many routine tasks will be solved technically. However, according to a study from the international Manpower-Group as many new jobs will be created as are disappearing. (Manpower -Group 2017). But the new labour market situation will demand upskilling in many ways and a readiness for continuous learning. Organisations will have to find a way to adapt constantly to this ongoing evolution of the workplace. This causes a shift in many companies' business-models. It has to be reevaluated, which interior processes still match, the current state of art and which have to be adjusted.

The requirements the organisation sustains towards its employees and applicants also have to match the renewed interior structure of automation and computer based processes, That continuous change demands a substantial amount of adaptability as well from the company itself as from its employees (Tirrel et al., 2021).

Especially the implementation of the revolutionary so-called Artificial Intelligence will be a big challenge.

Artificial intelligence can be defined as software-based technology, which uses different sets of algorithms to produce a sequence of decision-makings. As AI is a learning system it shows steady improvement in its performance.

The role AI is playing in different aspects of our life is constantly growing in importance. Nearly any device or computer based tool, e.g. translators or navigation systems rely on the usage of artificial intelligence.

Consequently, AI has recently established itself in the field of HRM as well, by adding several benefits to its entire process. The software provides new solutions for the process of recruitment, the selection of applicants, the training of staff and its further development.

A substantial amount of research studies show, that classic hiring methods do not produce a significant validity in predicting the performance of each individual. HR-managers often overestimate the quality of the commonly used methods and their individual judgement, which often results in poor personnel choices (Tirrel et al., 2021).

The usage of artificial intelligence provides a more efficient way of approaching the hiring-process, as much more applicants can be evaluated in a shorter time. Large amounts of personnel data could be scanned in no time using a defined algorithm, e.g. a regression equation, to identify a variety of people, which skills and educational background match the requirements for a certain position. Not only the amount of reviewed applications can be increased, but also the quality of outcome as the process of selection is based on a structured algorithm and much less on personal bias. Statistics clearly indicate that there are benefits from the usage of the AI in the HR-process.

By having programmed software algorithms, evaluating large amounts of data to exactly those parameters one defines, brings a level of objectivity in the selection process, which a human could not provide. The company can reduce its personnel costs and save resources of its managers as the software provides a databased recommendation in real time. The manager's process of selection is supported by the result of the software's analysis, so that the needed working time can not only be reduced, but the AI implements a whole new ensemble between manpower and machine power, which in combination lead to higher quality decisions and more satisfying results (Oswal et al., 2021).

Artificial Intelligence in the process of selecting employees is discussed highly controversial. Whereas it can be viewed as a perfect tool to quantify and structure a process, which is usually known to be difficult to be put into a strict frame, on the other hand it presents a threat of the software having too much influence (Tirrel et al., 2021,p.17).

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By having programmed software algorithms, evaluating large amounts of data to exactly those parameters one defines, brings a level of objectivity in the selection process, which a human could not provide. The election of applicants becomes a clearly structured and standardized sequence.

The establishing progress of the AI- software brings an considerably high amount of fix-costs, because the algorithms have to be fitted to the individual needs and requirements of the organization. The parameters and the data set, which is relevant for each request, have to be defined. But as the costs of each personnel-acquisition process can be reduced the overall costs will be decreasing very fast (Tirrel et al., 2021,p.20).

Of course the implementation of the new technologies may encounter resistance in the staff. Usually the older employees lack IT skills, some of them even willingness to meet the new requirements. On the other hand those employees are the ones, who have, due to the long time, they spent in the organisation, a holistic and funded knowledge and understanding about various parts of the organisation. By actively involving them, they can add valuable suggestions regarding the implementation of changes. A transfer of knowledge can be secured.

Thus, a successful digital transformation can only get along, when employees are sufficiently informed why a certain process in the organization has to be digitized and how this is going to affect his individual tasks. Especially employees of an advanced age, and those who have been in the organisation for a long time, must be guided through the upcoming changes by HRM and adjusted to their new tasks gradually.

By doing so the organization can assure that its staff gains intrinsic motivation to implement new aspects in their working procedure and will not be overwhelmed by an overload of changes.

Globalization

The beginning of global trade can be dated back to the Age of Discovery seven hundred years ago. But only technological progress like the invention of trains, cars and planes in the 20th century allowed a significant expansion of global business. The installation of the internet at the end of 20th century offered incredible new possibilities for unlimited communication and building up of international supply chains.

As globalization today is part of the above mentioned Fourth Industrial Revolution it is called Globalization 4.0 (World Economic Forum, 2019).

Today all important companies, forced by increasing competition, act in global markets, build branches all over the world, merge with international organizations and export their products to foreign countries (Noe, Raymond A., 2019,). Apart from the exchange of goods, services and capital, there is also a flow of human resources in international market. Highly competent employees are a success factor in global competition, thus the importance of HRM is still increasing. This evolution confronts the companies' HRM with a multitude of new opportunities, requirements and challenges. Above all, HRM is not restricted to a perhaps small national labour market but can hire employees from around the world (Sharma, 2019).

On the other hand, proven HRM practices cannot be transferred to foreign environments in many cases. Differences in the four following areas, which are connected with each other, are to be considered:

- Culture
- Education of staff
- Economic situation
- Political-legal framework (Noe, Raymond A., 2019, p.649)

Culture can be defined as a common view on important issues shared by all the members of a community. These cultural basic beliefs have to be taken into account by HRM when they want their measures to be successful. Practices, which work well in western countries, might fail in other parts of the world. So it is a big challenge for HRM to be well informed about the differences and make appropriate adaptations of its strategies.

The education of the people is also a very important factor. There are countries with free access to all schools and universities. They will offer a labor market with skilled people that means a high level of human capital. HRM in this case will find a sufficient pool of potential employees, whereas in other countries a low level of human capital is prevailing. The last one will be only appropriate for companies with low-skill productions.

The Economic standing and system in country is very important of course for HRM activities.

In rich countries, work is much more expensive than in poor or emerging countries, so are taxes on salary and boni. Therefore for globally acting organizations it is rather difficult to build up a consistent pay-structure (Noe, Raymond A., 2019,P.657). As to legal regulations, in most cases companies are obliged to apply at the same time to their domestic laws as well as to the rules of the country they are operating in concerning e.g. pay of minimum wages, anti-discrimination, gender equality, health care and participation of employees. Thus, it is very challenging for HRM to come up to all of these rules by adapting their practices.

Extensive research has been done to solve the question if globalization leads to HRM practices getting more equal, which means they are converging, or if the contrary, that means diverging, will take place. Up to now there is no clear answer to this problem, but probability tends in direction of growing divergence (Kaufman, 2016).

Diversity Management

Whereas previously employees were considered as a rather homogenous group in the last decades there has been a growing awareness of their different demographic characteristics concerning e.g. gender, age, ethnic background, religion, impairment, education, income. Research studies show, that these factors influence considerably the employee's attitude towards HRM (Lu et al., 2015).

Beyond views of anti-discrimination, over time diversity even was recognized as a possible chance and benefit for organizations, not only for the working climate but also for the companies' abilities to solve problems by swarm intelligence and creative approaches and thus contribute to performance and productivity. Furthermore, in narrow labour markets e.g. due to demographic ageing diversity selection enlarges the pool of potential staff.

On the other hand it became evident, that these positive developments not came by itself but needed constant support and coaching by the HRM (Kossek et al., 2003). Out of this perception evolved Diversity Management whose main functions

are the systematic promotion of diversity in organizations and the implementation of suitable inclusion practices. The latter aim at creating an atmosphere of respect and solidarity which enables each employee to do his best for the goals of the organization (Noe, Raymond A., 2019,p.307).

These measures must be scheduled on different levels : organization, teams and individuals (Krisor and Köster, 2016) Perhaps even the corporate culture has to be changed to fit to the new principles. teams and individuals have to undergo diversity trainings in many forms, e.g.:

- Instructions of the team leaders,
- language courses,
- coaching on culture-specific issues,
- mentoring programs to convey intercultural competences,
- awareness-Trainings to fight bias and stereotypes.

Additionally company diversity demands practical innovations and changes in structure and working processes to meet individual needs like e.g.:

- creation of working places for older and disabled employees,
- childcare possibilities,
- adjustment of the canteen's menu,
- set-up of praying rooms,
- flexible working hours (Hutter, 2020,n.p.).

The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic, manifesting in spring 2020, has brought about a dramatic and unforeseen change of working conditions which in the beginning hit HRM hard but after all contributed to its still growing significance. All of a sudden HRM professionals had to make decisions concerning as well the health care of their employees in the pandemic as the continuation of organizational goals :

Which employees should be sent to home office, which employees could still be working on site under hygienic precaution and which employees had to be dismissed right away?

Most of HRM everyday functions from job interviews to meetings had to take place via video.

The pandemic is not yet at its end. But it can already be seen that many trends it has kicked off are going to stay and will even be extended. Those trends are e.g. (Dixit, 2022):

- The hybrid bureau and flexibility of working hours

The so-called hybrid bureau is a mixture of work from home and work in the office. In some organizations the employee himself decides which working environment he prefers. Other companies offer fixed remote days and fixed office days. Probably very often there will be co-working models where people do not have workplaces on their own but will have to book working spaces when they intend to go to the office.

At the same time the hybrid working model can be combined with flexibility of working hours, which is strongly preferred by many employees.

With these forms of work of course it will be very challenging for HRM to stay in personal contact with the staff. Only with support of elaborated IT- technology control over working hours and performance can be kept.

- Upskilling through remote learning

During the pandemic a lot of people showed willingness to improve their skills and at the same time got to appreciate the advantages of remote learning. Without travelling, time and CO² saving , less expensive and in the same time personalized and intensive, online or video learning is a very good complement if not substitute for common forms of learning. And as modern work life is going to demand continuous upskilling remote learning is a perfect and economic way for HRM to offer to the staff.

- Virtual Meetings

Since the pandemic started, virtual meetings and conferences are the order of the day. HRM began to realize that even team building activities, assessment centres , team collaboration can be held online in a rather uncomplicated and inexpensive way.

- Rise of Virtual Reality

Due to the above-mentioned development Virtual Reality (VR) will experience a breakthrough. Through simulation of all kinds of working situations and challenges, it can be easily used for training or assessment. Besides research, studies suggest that data-driven selection of staff produces better results as individual human evaluation.

Summary and Conclusions

Having its roots in former administrative personnel departments HRM took an impressive evolution in the last decades. Besides administrative and operative functions its getting more and more involved with the strategic goals of organizations. The increasing significance of HRM goes in parallel with a new understanding of the employee as “human resource” or even “human capital”, a decisive factor in successful competition.

The character of HRM work is changing constantly; a complex pattern of current trends can be identified. The most important Mega Trend, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, is the rapidly progressing digital transformation. Artificial Intelligence is finding its way into acquisition and selection of personnel. Large amount of data can be processed in real time. The implementation of the new technologies is a challenging task for HRM, however.

At the same time globalization, another Mega Trend, requires new HRM strategies for operations in international markets. Differences of cultures, levels of education, economic systems and legal regulations have to be integrated. However, diversity of the staff gets to be considered as a possible success factor of productivity and is systematically encouraged. For this a lot of adaptive measures have to be initialized by HRM.

Since 2020, the Covid- 19 Pandemic has brought unforeseen dramatic changes in work life. A lot of these forced measures seem to pay off and will be encouraged by HRM, e.g. the work from home, virtual meetings, remote upskilling and learning, the use of virtual reality and increasing data-driven HRM practices.

Summing up it has to be said that of course most of the characterized trends apply mainly to office workers, clerks or management on different levels. E.g production workers, technicians or cleaning service cannot work from home. Manual workers will not benefit from virtual possibilities in the same way as the former mentioned.

At the end some critical remarks impose themselves.

At first glance, many of the changes in work life, especially those brought about by the pandemic, seem rather employee-friendly. However, there is another side to it. Thus, for instance, a remote work place in a German company, once established, must not necessarily be filled with a costly German employee. HRM can look for the least expensive offer all over the world, perhaps in a poor or emerging country. In some jobs, this could be a threat to European pay structure and social achievements. The increase of virtual communication in organizations is on the one hand comfortable and practical, but in combination with digital transformation, it includes many dangers too. Virtual information can be digitized and evaluated without problems- and it will never be forgotten. A tremendous amount of data will be collected from every employee, which may even go with him to other employers or to crucial situations of his private life. Some people will adapt easily and take benefit from these developments, but many will feel oppressed and perhaps get psychic illnesses.

What is necessary is a broad societal debate about what individuals expect and what they reject at their work places and how and where they want to set limits to technological overload.

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