

Title: Extended Abstract: “Coaxing the Corporate Will: Human Resource Management practitioners and the use of strategic agency at Royal Dutch Shell and Ford Motor Company, 1910-1950”

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Introduction:

Business historian Alfred Chandler (1962) traced the evolution of major US corporations through their changing strategies and structures in response to external forces, internally guided by the corresponding development of the management administrative function (Chandler, 1962). While largely absent in Chandler’s analysis, a growing number of scholars see the Human Resource Management (HRM) function – a nascent component of Chandler’s business administrators – as critical in the advancement of strategy, particularly sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Freitas, et al., 2011; Stahl, et al., 2020; Barrena-Martinez, et al., 2018; Aust, et al., 2020; Papalexandris, 2022; Cooke, et al., 2022), and even suggest that HRM exercised strategic influence in early corporations, although not in the modern sense (Kaufman, 2008).

Despite these assertions, HRM’s strategic role is far from clear. Scholarly debates concern the philosophical foundations and legitimacy of HRM as a management practice and its failure to achieve the anticipated strategic influence of the corporate agenda proposed by Lawler (1996) and Ulrich (1997) in part due to its subordination to other management occupations and emphasis on unitarian HRM practices (Kochan, 2007; Thompson, 2011; Wylie, et al., 2014; Marchington, 2015; Dundon and Rafferty, 2018). Potentially further blurring HRM’s impact is its shared agency with line management (Renwick, 2003; Kaufman, 2008; Guest and Conway, 2011; Sikora and Ferris, 2014; Woodrow and Guest, 2014) and lack of actual influence even when participating in strategic decision-making (Sheehan, 2005).

Some of these same scholars offer an alternative path for HRM, where it may regain its legitimacy amongst management peers through recognition and regulation of employee interests (Thompson, 2011), showing respect for humanity at work (Cleveland and Byrne, 2015), influencing long-term sustainability of the organization (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018) and embracing sharing of agency with line managers (Sikora and Ferris, 2014). Beyond academia, HRM’s strategic impact was recently recognized, albeit negatively, by a US court which held the former CHRO of McDonalds accountable for the company’s culture of harassment (Miller, et al, 2023).

Research Question:

The notion of HRM practitioners' accountability for corporate culture, the increasing calls for HRM to influence corporate sustainability strategy, and the potential early impact of HRM practitioners on strategy all point to the question, how have HRM practitioners used their agency to influence the strategy of corporations over time?

Methodology:

To address the research question, I will conduct an archival analysis of historical empirical data, including management correspondence, company policies, organizational histories, annual reports, legal documents, company data on employment, and various other artefacts that offer insight to the period. The approach will be grounded in Giddens's Structuration Theory (1984) which shows the interplay between institutional and praxis perspectives and temporality and offers a fitting construct through which to explore how individual human agency from HRM practitioners impacts strategy, and how such impacts become institutionalized over time, thus potentially demonstrating the strategic impact of certain HRM actions on the institutional norms and culture of a corporation. Specifically, I propose applying Jarzabkowski's (2008) model for Structuration theory, the Duality of Institutional and Action Realms over Time (Jarzabkowski, 2008) as a lens to observe the impact of individual agency on the institutional realm. To more clearly frame the historical contexts, I will use management ideological periods defined by Barley and Kunda (1992) and employ a comparative historical approach (Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Vaara and Lamberg, 2016). My subjects will include individual HRM practitioners, including line managers engaged in early HRM-type activity, at Ford Motor Company and Royal Dutch Shell, two large, long-standing corporations with significant US operational presence. A longitudinal case study approach will focus on two critical events in each corporation's development: for Ford, the Five-Dollar Day in 1914 and Ford's unionization in 1941; for Shell, establishment of the Houston refinery in 1929 and its unionization in 1933. In each case, I intend to examine individual practitioners' use of agency to influence the strategy guiding these events, detailing the instances and activities in which such strategic agency was exercised.

Research Contribution:

This research will contribute to the debate on current and future HRM by exploring its past through an integrated management lens. While much is written on the HRM function (Ulrich, 1997; Kaufman, 2008, et al.), and as it relates to strategy process and practice, historical institutionalism, and human agency in organizations (Edelman, et al., 1999; Ghemawat, 2002; Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Edwards, et al., 2022), relatively little research has integrated these topics, nor has it examined HRM practitioner actions that

constitute strategic agency from an individual perspective, instead describing the role of the HRM function as a collective (Ruona and Gibson, 2004; Wylie, et al., 2014; Cleveland, et al, 2015; Marchington, 2015; Markoulli, et al, 2017), or individual examination of HRM ethical dilemmas (Linehan and O'Brien, 2017). Further, the preponderance of literature subscribes to a common history of the HRM function's evolution, from clerical to strategic in modern times, with few critical challenges to this narrative (Kaufman, 2008). While the HRM function is identified as impacting strategic aspects of the firm, there is little reference to individual HRM practitioner activities that account for this strategic impact, and these activities are not scientifically framed using strategy process or practice lenses. Further, while significant historical research has been conducted on the HRM function (Kaufman, 2008), an exploration of this evolution through the lens of historical institutionalism (Streeck and Thelen, 2005) and comparative historical analysis (Mahoney and Thelen, 2015), with particular exploration of critical junctures and institutional change (Capoccia, in Mahoney and Thelen, 2015), historical timeframes, individual change agents, and evolving organizational routines is relevant as this is a probable space where HRM strategic agency would be observable. It is in this space where the strategic HRM practitioner, whose actions may be hidden through organizational obscurity and the opaqueness of time, may be uncovered, and where the question of HRM's true strategic impact may be addressed through empirical observation.

In terms of methodology, many academics have called for more integration of business history with management research (Bucheli & Wadhvani, 2014; Usdiken and Kipping, 2014; Leblebici, 2014), and this study will further the trend in applying historical research to understand business holistically, and towards more holistic management education to address wider societal problems that corporations are increasingly called on to address.

Finally, this research may help resolve a potential crisis of identity and confidence that many in the HRM field experience, helping to answer the question of strategic impact and clarifying what is most important emphasize as an effective practitioner of HRM.

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