

# Book Review: Strategic HRM: Research and practice in Ireland. By Brian Harney and Kathy Monks (eds) (2014). Dublin: Orpen Press.

Book review

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Brian Harney and Kathy Monks, the two editors of this book, set the tone well on the first page when they say: 'The purpose of this book is to provide an integrated overview of both theory and evidence of the practice of strategic HRM [SHRM] in an Irish context.' This book presents this 'integrated overview' extremely well with contributions from academics primarily based in Ireland and on Irish data. These include disparate, sometimes differing, strands within the debate about strategic human resource management (SHRM).

The book shows its high quality by containing, as the editors mention, 'multiple interpretations and sometimes contested meanings' (p. 1). The watchword, stated early in the text, is for subtle and evidence-based treatment of SHRM: 'we caution against simplistic assumptions of progress or staged evolution and invite more contingent explanations of the status of SHRM in Ireland' (Harney, Heffernan and Monks, p. 17). All this is done in chapters of similar length, which are very well structured and which give a succinct introduction to each aspect of SHRM then followed by the most cutting edge research; the key points of disagreement amongst scholars and then suggestions for future research. Obviously a great deal of work was put in by the editors to ensure such consistency and it makes the reader's task easier and much more pleasant.

## The heart of the matter: Aligning HRM with business strategy

For me one of the key themes of the book was stated by Gunnigle et al. (p. 96), who get to the crux of the human resource management (HRM) and SHRM debate when they say: 'At the core of the concept of strategic HRM is the premise that organisations should better align HRM with overall business strategy as this will yield a premium in terms of enhanced organisational performance.' On this issue, Harney et al. (p. 29) point out that in the academic and professional spheres there is a lack of 'an appreciation of how many of the decisions that are beneficial for business strategy or the HR function may not necessarily be beneficial for employees' (Harney et al., p. 29). In this and the other chapters the authors explore very well how this alignment of human resource (HR) and overall business strategy might take place and what impediments stand in its way.

Fundamental questions addressed in the book include whether good or effective SHRM systems lead to greater organisational profitability, competitive advantage or worker satisfaction and whether the latter can be measured by engagement, commitment or even organisational citizenship behaviour. Dealing with executive remuneration in a chapter on pay and performance in multinational companies in Ireland, Gunnigle et al. (p. 108) mention that the global downturn inspired 'greater analysis of the extent to which executive pay is correlated to performance', whilst Gubbins and Kennedy, in a chapter on learning and knowledge, highlight the 'strategic importance of learning and knowledge for providing sustainable competitive advantage' (p. 117) but state that 'in practice only some Irish organisations evaluated management development initiatives in relation to job performance and impact on business' (p. 119).

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Harney and Nolan underscore this point by stating that 'it is increasingly acknowledged that human resource management is critical to competitive success' (p. 157) in Irish small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and they point to 'an absence of research pursuing more in-depth ethnographic approaches which might better illuminate the dynamics and complexities of HR in this [SME] context' (p. 169). Probably the best statement of the needs of employees, as stated by Monks et al. on knowledge-intensive firms, but which I believe could be applied to most firms, is a type of synthesis of a number of classical and modern motivational ideas:

'In the case of HR practices, the factors that have been identified as important in the management of knowledge workers include high levels of pay; the intrinsic nature of the work itself such as the challenge it presents and the opportunities it provides for learning and the development of transferable skills; as well as promotion options, the opportunity to influence work decisions and relationships with co-workers' (p. 178).

Training and development is also an important motivator and Mulhall discusses the decline in funding for it, stating that 'providing effective career management and career development programmes is a critical challenge for twenty-first century human resource practitioners and business leaders' (p. 225). Intuitively and empirically this seems to make a great deal of sense, even for academics who often operate like sole traders and are either neglected and left to their own devices to develop their own career or, in a smaller number of third level and research institutions, work closely with a line manager to produce self-developmental academic career plans.

Impressively, the book contains a number of perspectives that problematise and question the sometimes uncritical perspective towards SHRM and its related ideas. For example, in Cullinane and Dundon's chapter they explore 'employee voice', taking us through varying unitarist and pluralist organisations and how they refuse, or choose, to accommodate employee perspectives. Starkly, they finish with the idea that 'as long as the indeterminate relations between workers and their employers continue to prevail, then the processes and methods for employee voice will remain an area fraught with tension' (p. 92).

Ultimately, Monks and Harney (p. 260) talk of 'the research and practice of SHRM [as] valuable and exciting domains that will continue to intrigue and challenge researchers and practitioners both in Ireland and internationally.' This very well edited and well-written book has made SHRM even more intriguing and challenging, as those who read it will discover.

## Suggestions for future SHRM research

Authors in this book attend well to how SHRM operates in SMEs, in knowledge intensive firms and in healthcare, all of which have subtly different HR dynamics. If I had a suggestion regarding content it would be that a future volume examines public sector SHRM in greater depth, not just because the State is a large employer but because the employee relationship there is different from the private sector; the atmosphere is more pluralist as union representation is more widespread, plus there is more employee emphasis on the vocational nature of work, which is often professionalised. If the State continues- as is the case in most western developed economies- to move to privatisation and outsourcing of public sector services, then employees will need better work systems accompanied by more sophisticated management practices from managers who have received postgraduate level management training. Thus Harney et al.'s statement (p. 23) is appropriate here: 'employee insights and experiences have been neglected and... line managers' roles have been insufficiently explored.' There has been much good research on the public sector but there is room for much more.

## SHRM and future organisational practice

This brings us to the question of where this very good book leaves us with respect to SHRM and to organisational practice as a whole; the 'so what' we can ask of any book. I get a strong sense that management *per se* needs to be better in many organisations and the overarching focus on profits may actually impoverish the potential of many workers. In too many organisations, increases in remuneration can only be achieved by promotion to management positions to which some people are not suited, particularly as the person may be overly task oriented and may not have the inter-personal skills to help those they are managing to perform well or, in current parlance, to be engaged

(Truss et al., 2014). Furthermore, I disagree that those in HRM functions are invariably HRM 'professionals'. Certainly there are many graduates in HR functions and there are many who have taken Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) accredited degrees and courses but there are still many who haven't and whose role in HR is that of the old clerk of works/personnel model and thus very far removed from any notion of future planning or talent management, as excellently described in this book.

Admittedly, this is both a critical and a pessimistic view of HR currently. I think that what is important is that entry into HR needs to be by graduates with degrees containing a strong HR focus and for whom it is not an afterthought or a second choice. Furthermore, even in unitarist, 'hard' HR companies, I think it is better for a HR function to act as an honest broker between management and employees; a type of 'truth to power' for the former, if you will, where the HR function uses its expertise to appraise mainstream management of the issues it needs to improve or to compromise upon. Taylorist and theory X type approaches are still used far too much and it is better, in my opinion, to realise how motivated, idealistic and generous most workers are. Thus it is important to consider Cullinane and Dundon's statement that 'it is difficult to see why democratic rights cannot extend from the political to the economic sphere of production, to give workers a substantial say over aspects of their working lives' (p. 79).

To the charge that some workers are difficult and have to be managed closely, it could be said that perhaps the organisation should have been more careful in hiring them and that the job of management is to support, guide and aid workers in carrying out the job of work effectively. The conception where management are viewed as the repository of wisdom is a weak one at best. Better to have an organisation which is not merely the perpetuator of hegemonic or patriarchal practices, as is frequently the case, but rather one in which reflexivity and perspectives which challenge groupthink are lauded. Either way, better management training is implicated.

## HR practitioners should read this: How can we get it to them?

Ultimately, whilst the material in this edited volume would be of great use to HR practitioners it will most likely be read by an academic audience. This may be because HR practitioners are often under pressure to meet deadlines and may not realise that such sophisticated thinking is taking place about SHRM within academic research. This points to one of the great challenges for business researchers, namely that of highlighting to business people how much better their businesses can be should they take on board an evidence-based approach when constructing HR structures and processes. As the editors note in their introduction, there is a 'growing recognition that the management of people is of strategic significance to success ... a burgeoning stream of international evidence over the last two decades has highlighted the impact that SHRM can have in shaping both organisational performance and employee outcomes' (p. 3).

The challenge is to do this in a manner which respects employee work-life balance, employee dignity through their reasonable participation in the nature and direction of their work and, of course, that such SHRM policies actually lead to the business or public sector entity being profitable and thriving. The authors in this important volume have done that well and have provided a road map for policy makers and business leaders to follow. If the latter do so it will be good for millions of employees, for society and for public and private sector organisations. The challenge is getting those decision makers to go down that road. I hope that they read this book and do so. To conclude, this is a very well written and edited book which will be of use not just to undergraduates, postgraduates and executives but also to many lecturers who want a concise and up-to-date treatment of this area.

### References

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