

# Human Resource Management in Organizational Project Management

## *Current Trends and Future Prospects*

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### Introduction

It is increasingly common for work activities to take place in projects, and projects are therefore of growing importance as sites for career development, for leading and managing professional workers, and for individual and organizational development.

Links between human resource management (HRM) activities that occur on projects, and their broader implications for project-based organizations in terms of knowledge, learning and competence development, are therefore important foci for research.

Projects are also important from the perspective of the well-being, ethical treatment, and motivation of workers.

Projects are established within and between organizational functions (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011) but also span organizational boundaries (Lundin & Steinhórsson, 2003; Swart & Kinnie, 2014). Projects involve people from within and between organizational departments and also within and between disciplinary specialties. The implications of project-based organizing for managing human resources would appear to be significant (Huemann, 2015; Keegan, Huemann, & Turner, 2012; Palm & Lindahl, 2015; Söderlund & Bredin, 2006; Vicentini & Boccardelli, 2014), and yet traditional

HRM models, where projects are not a key consideration, continue to dominate mainstream HRM theorizing (Swart & Kinnie, 2014). In mainstream HRM theorizing, traditional long-term and stable employment relationships are assumed and focal organizations are those with clearly defined internal and external boundaries.

Project management literature has also traditionally downplayed what could be called the human factor – human capital or people aspects of project organization and management (Keegan & Turner, 2003). A shift from the mainly technical to increasingly people-focused aspects of project management has, however, been discernible in the past decade (Huemann, Keegan, & Turner, 2007). Project management researchers have started to explore more systematically HRM issues and their possible contribution to the performance of organizations that do most of their work in projects (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011). The systematic study of project professionals' careers has developed recently, reflecting an increased appreciation of the importance of projects as a major part of many organizations (Crawford, French, & Lloyd-Walker, 2013; Hölzle, 2010) and the resulting increased importance of HRM issues and “people capabilities” (Bredin, 2008) required of project-based organizations is slowly increasing. Similarly, even though HRM theorists have not, to date, fully embraced the importance of the project context for practices, processes, and outcomes, this too appears to be changing as studies of HRM become more contextually sensitive. We are witnessing what might be regarded as the beginning of a general reorientation away from universal best practices and towards more contextually sensitive HRM research (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Kroon & Paauwe, 2014; Paauwe, 2004; Watson, 2010).

Our goal in this chapter is to provide an added stimulus to recent efforts to bridge the separate literatures of HRM and OPM. While the links between these fields

are slowly attracting sustained interest from researchers operating from both domains (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Pinto, Dawood, & Pinto, 2014; Swart & Kinnie, 2014), much remains to be done in terms of research on HRM practices and processes in a project-based context. We therefore discuss findings from recent research on HRM in Organizational Project Management (OPM) and identify key themes and areas for further investigation.

This chapter is organized along two major themes that are of significance in recent work on HRM in OPM. First, we identify a distinction in the literature regarding HRM at the project level (Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Palm & Lindahl, 2015 and HRM at the broader organizational level (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Swart & Kinnie, 2014). While highlighting research that deals with the processes and practices at both levels, we also discern a growing interest in the project level. The second major theme is the multiactor nature of HRM (Meijerink, Bondarouk, & Looise, 2013), which is perhaps more evident in project-based organizations than in other settings. We discuss research that indicates there is considerable complexity in terms of HRM influence distribution (Dany, Guedri, & Hatt, 2008) in a project context and review findings from research on the actors involved in project-based HRM and the challenges they face. We then draw out the dominant theoretical lenses used to study HRM in terms of OPM. We highlight gaps that exist between these approaches in the project management literature and those evident in the broader HRM literature. On this basis, we offer a research agenda for how to go forward and deepen knowledge and insights on this important area of project management and HRM research.

# HRM, Projects, and Organizations

We can distinguish between two foci in the literature on HRM and project-based organizations. One focus is that of HRM processes and practices on projects. The second is a focus on the organizational level whereby links between HRM in projects and HRM issues in the broader organization such as corporate strategy, strategic and functional capability development, and organizational development, are important (Bredin, 2008; Swart & Kinnie, 2014). Our contention is that both these foci are vital to understanding the impact of HRM on OPM in practice and in theory.

## HR Processes and Practices on Projects

Until recently, the project has to some extent been seen as a black box in terms of HRM. This is likely because of the inherently temporary or finite nature of projects (cf. Bakker, 2010; Turner & Müller, 2003; Winch, 2014) and the assumption that HRM policies and practices should have a permanent character. This assumption is in line with the fact that HRM research developed over several decades in the context of functional and permanent organizational structures and these continue to dominate how HRM is understood to work (Keegan & Boselie, 2006). An exploration of the project *itself* as a site for HRM-related activity has in turn been viewed in terms of generally narrow technical aspects such as, for example, training techniques (Tabassi & Bakar, 2009) and safety requirements for projects (e.g., Lai, Liu, & Ling, 2011).

Explicitly conceptualizing the project as a temporary organization (Bakker, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Turner & Müller, 2003; Winch, 2014) has created a basis for researchers exploring HR processes and practices specific to projects in a more strategic

manner (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011), and also in terms of broader issues such as the ethical treatment of workers and their well-being (Huemann, 2007; Turner, Huemann, & Keegan, 2008). Articulating the idea of the project as a workplace (Palm & Lindahl, 2015 or as a career (Huemann, 2015) changes the focus on project-specific HRM practices and processes from a largely technical and resource allocation issue to a focus on whether and how project-specific practices contribute to the long-term development of personnel, satisfaction of career goals, and achievement of competence development of broader relevance to the organization. The project, when viewed as a temporary workplace, can be seen as a specific work context with characteristics including high goal orientation, uncertainty, high degree of responsibility, and multirole assignments. These features create opportunities but also challenges for project professionals. Following Huemann (2015), the project as a workplace has the following characteristics as presented in [Table 11.1](#).

**Begin Table 11.1**

Table 11.1  
Challenges and Potentials of Project Work

Characteristics of Projects as Work Place	Challenges for Project Professionals	Opportunities for Project Professionals
High goal orientation, result focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcommitment, burnout</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrinsic motivation</li> <li>• Source of commitment</li> <li>• Providing sense</li> </ul>
Uncertainty/novel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adventure</li> <li>• Learning possibilities</li> </ul>
High degree of responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling of being left alone, no support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom and empowerment</li> </ul>
Multirole assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Variety of roles</li> <li>• New challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project overload, stress</li> </ul>

*Source:* Based on Huemann, 2015.

**End Table 11.1**

For example, according to Asquin et al. (2010), projects elicit high levels of individual commitment because the time-limited nature of projects creates urgency and stirs individuals to action, giving them clear objectives to be fulfilled against challenging deadlines and through teamwork. A similar conclusion is drawn by Lindgren and Packendorff (2006), who studied project personnel in an IT consultancy context. They found that the project work practices are premised on rationality, efficiency, and control as well as high levels of personal commitment to project work. As a result of project work structures eliciting high degrees of personal responsibility, researchers hold that the challenges of project overload are especially high in organizations that perform small- to medium-sized external projects, where project personnel work simultaneously in more than one project (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006; Turner et al., 2008; Zika-Viktorsson, Sundström, & Engwall, 2006). Project personnel need to take greater responsibility for their work (in terms of task completion), their work-life balance (including their personal health-related well-being), and their careers (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Turner et al., 2008).

However, projects also represent opportunities for project professionals. If projects, supported by professional project management methods, are introduced in an organization, this can lead to increased commitment, dynamism, support, and solidarity among personnel working in project teams towards joint goals (Hovmark & Nordqvist, 1996). Projects are motivating for project personnel (Bredin, 2008). The time-limited goal-orientation they construct provides the members of the project organization with clear objectives to be fulfilled using teamwork. Project work can create a sense of meaning for project personnel as their own contribution to achieving project outcomes is often highly visible for them due to the immediate and holistic aspects of project work

compared with functionally structured work (Huemann, 2015). However, using projects to organize work requires new and different HRM practices and processes compared with traditional, functionally structured organizations.

Huemann et al. (2007) developed a broad framework for considering HRM practices and processes specific to the project, including processes for assigning personnel to projects, for managing performance on projects, (e.g., developing, appraising, and rewarding), and for dispersing personnel from projects. Assigning personnel to the project constitutes the project from a human resource perspective and helps the project to come into existence. While formal assignment processes often exist in practice, they found that practices and processes for dispersing personnel at the end of projects are often not explicitly organized by companies. The dispersal function we envisage may be similar in nature and principle to the outplacement function in traditional organizations, where employees are facilitated to move from work to work in organizations with active employability processes (Peters & Lam, 2015). Failure to actively facilitate project-to-project mobility creates the potential for insecurity among personnel and loss of valuable knowledge and expertise acquired by personnel who leave the organization at this time. This is also the case for project personnel working on projects on a secondment or contracting basis which is quite common (Keegan & Turner, 2001).

The topic of project-related training and development (e.g. Brière, Proulx, Flores, & Laporte, 2015; Buganza, Kalchschmidt, Bartezzaghi, & Amabile, 2013; Tabassi & Bakar, 2009; Tabassi, Ramli, & Bakar, 2012) has also been described in some detail in the literature. Research by Tabassi and Bakar (2009) suggests that most of the workers involved in construction projects are unskilled and that fundamental problems and

barriers exist in terms of offering integrated training for project personnel. Barriers include:

high expenses of construction training courses, financial problems, short-term contracts of the workers, large number and various types of construction learning points, low level of labor education, lack of incentive among the workers for training, inadequate relations between the contractor or client and the labor, little attention from the client on the importance of skilled labor in projects, and time-consuming” (Tabassi & Bakar, 2009, p. 476).

Their research suggests that 77 percent of construction projects faced financial problems due to the use of unskilled project personnel and indicates that skilled labor plays an important role in decreasing the cost of construction projects.

Research by Buganza et al. (2013) pointed to the important effect that training can have in improving project manager behaviors. Their research provided evidence that the relationship between training effectiveness and the frequency of displays of effective managerial behavior is influenced by the compatibility between training activity and the role of trainees on the one hand and the context in which trainees operate on the other. They suggest organizations should pay close attention when designing (managerial) training activities so these are consistent with trainees’ roles and the environmental conditions in which trainees operate, as these have an impact on the effectiveness of the training.

Reward and performance management practices and processes, including appraisal, are somewhat underdeveloped as topics in both mainstream HRM writing on the project context and in project management literature dealing with HRM issues.



Huemann et al. (2007) found that project managers have limited formal discretion for rewarding personnel for project-related performance. Their discretion extends mainly to formal use of budgets for celebrating project successes (e.g., achieving a milestone) or informally using their influence to suggest to others (e.g., line managers) that a project professional deserves some form of additional compensation. Considerably more research is needed on issues such as appraisal and reward practices and processes on projects.

Table 11.2 lists the practices and processes associated with HRM in projects reported in the literature.

**Begin Table 11.2**

Table 11.2  
Summary of HRM Processes Practices on Projects Identified in the Literature

Project HRM Processes	Project HRM Practices	Relevant Publications
Assigning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project resource planning</li> <li>• Recruiting people for project</li> <li>• Voluntary enrolment in projects</li> <li>• Use of skill matrices</li> </ul>	Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Eskerod & Jepsen, 2005; Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Laslo, 2010; Turner, Huemann, & Keegan, 2007; Turner et al., 2008
Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team-building: e.g., practices for encouraging team members to meet up during the project</li> <li>• Training: diversity training, training in evaluation and refocusing self-learning interviews, conflict resolution techniques, intercultural awareness</li> <li>• Training on project-related skills</li> <li>• On-the-project training, sending trainers on site</li> <li>• Organizing opportunities for learning on a project</li> <li>• Opportunities to exercise project leadership</li> <li>• Opportunities to develop professional reputation</li> </ul>	Brière et al., 2014; Buganza et al., 2013; Calamel, Defélix, Picq, & Retour, 2012; Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2011; Minbaeva, 2005; Popaitoon & Siengthai, 2014; Tabassi & Bakar, 2009; Tabassi et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2007, 2008

Appraising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback – 360-degree feedback</li> <li>• Formal project appraisals</li> </ul>	Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Medina & Medina, 2014; Turner et al., 2007, 2008; Wickramasinghe & Liyanage, 2013)
Rewarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rewarding the team: e.g., group bonus-based on project team performance</li> <li>• Rewarding team members for their accomplishments</li> <li>• Nonmonetary rewards: e.g., social events, awards certificates, extra holiday time, additional training or development opportunities, explicit links to future project opportunities; chance to contribute to important decisions</li> </ul>	(Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2011; Popaitoon & Siengthai, 2014; Turner et al., 2007, 2008; Zwikael & Unger-Aviram, 2010)
Dispersing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practices for capturing knowledge at the end of project – particularly from temporary workers</li> <li>• Assign to a new project</li> <li>• Return personnel to the line to perform functional duties</li> <li>• Send personnel to the bench</li> </ul>	Eskerod & Jepsen, 2005; Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2007, 2008

### End Table 11.2

## HRM Practices and Processes Linking the Project and the Organization

Where project-based organizations and HRM are a focus of attention, Vicentini and Boccardelli (2014) note that issues are often framed in terms of latent forms of organization of relevance to projects. Theorists therefore focus on the (more) stable context within which projects are embedded including, for example, project ecologies (Grabher, 2004) and networks (Swart & Kinnie, 2014). Researchers have sought to determine how the broader structures (e.g., networks and project ecologies) provide the backdrop to finite project-based relationships and offer continuity and stability for

the finite and transient conditions facing mobile project workers (Borg & Söderlund, 2014).

Processes and practices linking HRM in the project and HRM in the permanent organization are described in literature (Huemann, 2013; Huemann et al., 2007; Swart, & Kinnie, 2014; Turner et al., 2008). From the perspective of the broader organization, Swart and Kinnie (2014) conceptualize a networked HRM model in which human capital can be deployed by organizations operating within a network at a network level as well as within individual firms (Swart, & Kinnie, 2014). Their work highlights the reliance of the network on the human capital of each firm while at the same time focusing on the network implications of human capital development and deployment. Bredin (2008), in a similar fashion, addresses the question of how project organizations might build broad capabilities for managing projects by exploiting more effectively people capability across projects and maintaining a focus on the strategic interactions between different forms of capability. People capability is seen as emerging at the intersection of strategic capability, project capability, and functional capability (Bredin, 2008).

In this stream of work, HRM practices and processes at the organizational level – at the cross-project and even cross-organizational levels – are the key focus. For example, Ballesteros-Pérez, González-Cruz, and Fernández-Diego (2012) discuss the use of sociometric techniques for HRM allocation across multiple projects. This method supports the project manager in decision making regarding the selection of the project team, from the perspective of social interactions. Ballesteros-Pérez et al. (2012) aimed to further develop the sociometric technique, focusing on the need to assign staff to

different projects from a pool of available human resources, with the objective to choose the most effective combination of people from the perspective of social interaction.

One of the major themes dealt with in recent literature is the necessity of conceptualizing the integration between HRM practices at the level of the project (e.g., assigning personnel to a project) and the broader implications of such decisions at individual and organizational levels. The links between specific project assignments and career development of the individual (Calamel et al., 2012; Crawford et al., 2013) or knowledge sharing and transfer for the organization (e.g., Borg & Söderlund, 2014) are some examples. In terms of HRM in the project and links to careers, Dainty, Raidén, and Neale (2009) describe the importance of relationships between the deployment of project personnel and broader career management processes at the organizational level. They suggest that for effective management, a systematic and concurrent combination of organizational, project, and employee data is required in order to make appropriate resource allocation decisions. Similarly, Bredin (2008, p. 573) argues that “finding ways to match the short-term requirement of the projects, with the careers and individual development of employees *ought to be* important activities of the people management system” (emphasis added). Keegan et al. (2012) support this idea with their assertion that decisions made regarding project assignment are of strategic importance to meeting individual career interests of project professionals. A development strategy for project personnel may be premised on projects being explicitly used as learning opportunities and stepping stones within the career paths that organizations offer. Career systems and incentive systems suitable for supporting OPM could therefore be built on using experiences developed on projects in different

career fields to support project management careers and professionalization (Hözl, 2010; Jones, & DeFillippi, 1996; Larsen, 2002).

Decisions regarding the assignment of personnel to projects also have fairness implications for employees and managers and may shape employee diversity outcomes at the organizational level. The reasons for this include that informal processes emerge from empirical evidence as playing an important role in project assignment (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012). As employees seek to arrange assignment to projects for personal and career-related reasons, they are motivated to be proactive in seeking out suitable assignments and often need to manage these processes at an informal and highly decentralized level. This creates a possible disconnect between the formal processes of project assignment arranged at an organizational and at an *intended* level (Purcell, & Hutchinson, 2007) and practices realized by the actions of decentralized actors including employees (Arthur & DeFillippi, 1998; Keegan et al., 2012). Therefore, an area of significant research in terms of links between HRM in projects and HRM at the broader organizational level is the research describing processes and practices for the management of careers in project-based organizations.

In light of this, researchers have recently suggested a number of specific interventions for career development that consider the links between project-specific and broader organizational aspects. For example, in a recent study, Calamel et al. (2012) describe practices including the appointment of career-tracking officers to monitor project professionals' movements between projects and career implications. They emphasize the importance of regular interviews for evaluating project professionals' desire to move from one project to another. Crawford et al. (2013) also identify the need for tailored career interventions, including the appointment of

mentors, to address specific issues facing project managers with different characteristics; i.e., in terms of gender and age. Hölzle (2010) identifies career interventions for developing social and leadership competencies of project professionals and recommends integration of a mentoring model for project managers with mandatory support of project managers by higher-ranked project managers. This is needed so that development on projects is integrated into overall development in terms of the strategic needs of the organization.

While the literature indicates the importance generally of linking HRM in the project with career development issues, we think care is required in avoiding the suggestion that one-size-fits-all frameworks necessarily work. Bredin and Söderlund (2013), for example, theorize that the type of project-based organization might moderate the appropriateness of particular career management models. They differentiate two archetypes of career development models known as the competence strategy model and talent management model. The emphasis of the competence strategy model lies on the needs of the organization, the strategic evolution, and growth areas. In contrast, the talent management model focuses more on the individual requirements and the ways to support the individual development process and less on the strategic evolution of the firm.

In earlier work, Bredin and Söderlund (2011) found that line managers act as both technical leaders as well as mentors to project workers. This happens in intrafunctional projects while line managers in interfunctional projects tend to focus on longer-term competence development and career development in their units. The latter focus less on technical leadership and day-to-day mentoring activities. As such, their

empirical research suggests that the specific type of career support required is likely to differ from setting to setting.

In their empirical study, Keegan et al. (2012) highlighted the HRM roles of both line and project managers. They saw a clear HRM role for project managers in terms of employee well-being and career development, given the proximity of project managers to employees and their line of sight to employees' career-related concerns and decisions. They identified tensions between the long- and short-term foci of project managers' HRM responsibilities as a source of potential difficulties, with career development of particular concern for project workers as an issue spanning different specific projects.

Dainty et al. (2009) highlight the interactions between practices for project assignment and practices for career development to make an explicit link between what happens in projects and how this influences competence development more broadly for OPM. They recommend practices for aligning project assignment practices to ensure individual and organizational needs are dual foci of project assignment and career decisions. Broader fairness and transparency as well as equity issues involved in project assignment decisions and their links with diversity management and career development were also noted in the study by Keegan et al. (2012).

Recent research theorizing on the kinds of competencies project professionals require for successful careers raises some interesting issues. For example, based on an exploratory study of workers' interpretations of the nature of their work in engineering consultancies, Borg and Söderlund (2014) identify levels of "liminality competence" of different project workers. These are seen as influential in how workers approach assignments. They are also relevant for workers' framing of assignments, and this in

turn shapes the opportunities they see and can exploit in terms of their careers and opportunities. These competencies are therefore important for organizations in managing knowledge transfer. Liminality competence refers to the ability of project workers to cope with the transient nature of project work, an issue also raised in research by Keegan and Turner (2003). While Bredin and Söderlund (2014) do not provide concrete suggestions for how HRM professionals might support the development of liminality competence of employees, their work suggests a potential for further theoretical and practical developments in this area. Huemann (2015) describes more generally that project-oriented careers are *fragmented careers* and stresses that the responsibility for career development rests primarily with the project professional, which points to a need for research that examines how HRM professionals align to these emerging types of career models where liminality, transience, and fragmentation are key features. Finally, the specifics of dynamic *bridging* HRM processes and practices may also change with the project maturity of an organization (Huemann, 2010).

**Begin Table 11.3**

Table 11.3  
**Summary of HRM Practices and Processes Linking the Project and the Project-Based Organization**

HRM Process	HRM Practice	Relevant Publications
Recruiting/selecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Considering Project Management relevant behaviors when recruiting/selecting future project personnel</li> </ul>	Brière et al., 2015 Dainty et al., 2009; Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Kang, Snell, & Swart, 2012; Keegan et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2011; Medina & Medina, 2014; Turner et al., 2007, 2008
Allocating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Company-wide portfolio management (resource planning), many models</li> <li>Categorization of project types in order to match adequate project personnel</li> </ul>	Ballesteros-Pérez et al., 2012; Costa, 2013; Dainty et al., 2009; Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2007, 2008



Developing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardized PM training; leadership training</li> <li>• Assessment/development centers of Project Managers and team members</li> <li>• Developing work experiences</li> <li>• Training on the project (site)</li> <li>• Internal promotion (co-location)</li> <li>• PM certification</li> <li>• Career management</li> </ul>	Bredin & Söderlund, 2013; Brière et al., 2014; Buganza et al., 2013; Dainty et al., 2009; Foss, Minbaeva, Pedersen, & Reinholt, 2009; Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Medina & Medina, 2014; Popaitoon & Siengthai, 2014; Tabassi & Bakar, 2009; Tabassi et al., 2012; Thompson & Heron, 2006; Turner et al., 2007, 2008; Wickramasinghe & Liyanage, 2013
Appraising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of competence required on project</li> <li>• Performance measurement</li> <li>• Performance appraisals</li> </ul>	Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2008
Rewarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of payment structures, incentive system, performance management system that consider projects explicitly</li> <li>• Reduction of status differentiation</li> <li>• Recognition of competences acquired on projects</li> <li>• Assignment to a project to enable learning</li> </ul>	Calamel et al., 2012; Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2011; Medina & Medina, 2014; Popaitoon & Siengthai, 2014; Turner et al., 2008
Releasing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capture knowledge at the end of project, particularly from temporary workers</li> <li>• Some companies maintain network of temporary workers</li> </ul>	Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015; Keegan et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2008

### End Table 11.3

## HRM Actors in OPM

The second major theme emerging in recent years is that of HRM actors in project management and the roles they play. The prevailing understanding of HRM actors in mainstream HRM literature is that multiactor HRM systems are important (Meijerink et al., 2013), and also that there is a golden triangle between HRM practitioners (specialists), line managers, and employees (Jackson, Schuler, & Werner, 2011).

This golden triangle provides a dominant framing of HRM actors and influences distribution (Dany et al., 2008). It has become gradually translated into a generalized conceptualization that HRM specialists develop intended policies, line managers are mainly responsible for actual or implemented practices, and employees perceive practices (Nishii & Wright, 2007; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

Empirical research in the context of project-based organizations suggests a much wider range of actors as having roles in both policy development, and in HRM enactment and implementation tasks in OPM. Actors identified include line managers, senior managers, project managers, specialist HR personnel, and employees (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012; Lai et al., 2011). Given the high levels of decentralization in terms of tasks and supervision, and the extent of boundary spanning work activity in project-based organizations, HRM tasks and influence over policies and practices appear to be quite diffuse and spread across actors in and beyond the HR department and line management.

A useful framework for capturing this increased complexity is the “HR Quadriad” developed by Bredin and Söderlund (2011), which highlights the roles of line managers, employees, project managers and HR specialists. Huemann’s work (2010) further identifies the diffuse nature of actors involved in HRM when she describes the importance of the portfolio group, expert pool managers, the project management office, and the project academy, as shaping HRM processes and practices. The project owner/client may also play an important role in HRM practices and processes, and project workers/team members are clearly involved in implementing HRM tasks (Keegan et al., 2012).

# HRM Task and Influence Distribution

The project-based organization is an especially challenging HRM context because of the interplay of actors carrying out different HRM tasks and influencing different levels of policy and practice development. Added to this, very little empirical research has been carried out to date on the overarching role of the HRM function in this context, or how HRM specialists coordinate the activities of different actors. Bredin and Söderlund (2011, 2013) stress that HRM *should be* a collaboration between HR specialists, line managers, project managers, and project workers. They differentiate two configurations of HRM coordination based on whether project work is intrafunctional or interfunctional. As more work in an organization is carried out in projects, more of the HRM responsibilities of the HRM specialist are handed over to others, including line managers and project workers and, to some extent, to project managers (Bredin & Söderlund, 2013). To the extent that situational factors encourage a task rather than people orientation in project manager leadership behavior (Yukl, 2012), this could form a barrier to effective HRM in an OPM context. The role of the HRM department is also clearly changing in this context, but details are lacking regarding precisely what this means for HRM actors or the possible configurations of HRM-related activities.

In the mainstream literature, there is an increased tendency to highlight the devolution of HRM to line managers. In the project-based context, the HRM department needs to set policy and provide guidance, consultancy, and advice not only for line managers but for all actors involved. Given the diffusion of responsibilities, it is also likely it needs to advocate and protect employee well-being and act as an arbiter in disputes and conflicts (Keegan et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2008). Whether and how it does this remains unclear from current research. Limited empirical research does

suggest there are contextual differences in HRM role distribution and interplay, depending on the organizational structure of the company and particularly on the kinds of projects that are undertaken (Keegan & Turner, 2002). The average size and duration of projects and the understanding or philosophy of the HRM department all appear to play a role in how HRM in these settings takes shape and can, or does, influence OPM (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012).

The HR roles of project managers remains somewhat unclear from current literature. Keegan et al. (2012) argue that project managers carry out HRM tasks de facto, which is unsurprising given their daily contact with and influence over the motivation and performance of project workers. However, they also acknowledge that in most cases project managers are not given formal responsibility for HRM. Bredin and Söderlund (2011) also see a possible role for project managers, but emphasize the changing role of line managers much more in their framework, leaving the HRM role of project managers somewhat underspecified.

Brière et al. (2015) conceptualize at a general and quite abstract level a range of competencies that project managers operating in international nongovernmental organizations need, including change management, team building, and communication skills. Zhang, Zuo, and Zillante (2013) studied the social competencies of project managers in construction projects and argue that leading others and social awareness is important for project managers.

To the extent that project managers' leadership behavior influences project workers' abilities, motivation and opportunities to perform, the HRM roles of project managers remains a critical issue. Researchers to date, with few exceptions, have not yet adequately explored this issue. The project management office may play a more or

less important role in the HRM system depending on the level of readiness of the HRM department to embrace a project-orientation (Huemann, 2010). Academic research highlights the importance of the HRM tasks by the PMO office, especially if the HRM department does not provide adequate HRM support for OPM (Huemann, 2010; Huemann, 2015). To support a high level of project orientation, Huemann (2010) suggests that the HRM function needs to be structured as a project-oriented HRM unit. This involves a more networked form of operating in terms of dealing with and supporting a wider range of HRM relevant actors including project managers and workers. Research by Swart and Kinnie (2014) also provides suggestions in this direction.

The distance of HR specialists from operations in intrafunctional project settings can prevent the effective coordination of different HR actors. Bredin and Söderlund (2011), for example, showed that HRM specialists are valued as expert advisors in interfunctional project settings, and that HR should acknowledge and support HRM roles of project managers in intrafunctional settings more substantially, a finding also supported by the work of Keegan et al. (2012).

Swart and Kinnie (2014) conceptualize the boundaries of contemporary HRM models at an extraorganizational network level and argue that as work activities take place across organizations in networks, appropriate HRM models need to be developed for these contemporary contexts. They identify three models: buffering the network, borrowing, and balancing.

Finally, the operationalization of "management by projects" as an explicit HRM strategy impacts the organization of HRM, especially in terms of the HR department. The HR department can no longer be seen as a functionally organized administrative

function. It should acquire an increasingly networked character to manage cooperation among multiple actors in a distributed, networked HRM setting.

Arguably, the HRM department must itself operate in a project-oriented manner, and the HR department will increasingly need to apply projects and professional project management to organize the required cooperation between actors in networked project-based settings (Huemann, 2015). To date however, few studies of HRM in OPM have addressed these emerging issues.

A more networked form of HRM system with a clear interplay between HR managers, the project management office, and project managers is perhaps required. This would facilitate a viable structure for raising the HR-related issues that support OPM, project managers, project workers, and others operating in tandem in this context. The systematic incorporation of project learning opportunities, and seeing projects as sources of potential employee motivation and opportunity to perform (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000) would be more likely to occur.

In addition, the HRM function could play a role in addressing systematically the well-being and personal challenges of managing projects for project personnel (Pinto et al., 2014). These challenges emanate from the uncertainty/novelty of project work, fragmented careers, and multirole assignments (Keegan et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2008; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). The search for balance between organizational and employee well-being needs (Francis and Keegan, 2006), which exist in a paradoxical relationship to each other (Aust, Brandl, & Keegan, 2015), would be actively stimulated when the HRM specialists focus on employees also as a key stakeholder.

## Discussion

In the past decade, more attention has been paid by researchers to HRM in project-based organizations. However, despite calls for increased contextual sensitivity on the part of HRM researchers (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Keegan & Boselie, 2006; Paauwe, 2004), the context of project work is still not a mainstream topic in HRM research.

While there is an increased interest in project work and the project work environment (Vicentini & Boccardelli, 2014), HRM theorists do not focus a great deal on this context, and mainstream HRM theorizing is still based mainly on assumptions that tend not to hold in the project context (Huemann et al., 2007; Swart & Kinnie, 2014). From recent research, which we have discussed throughout the chapter, some recurring issues arise that merit discussion in the following sections.

Based on an examination of research linking HRM and OPM, more attention should be given to HR practices and processes in projects. We do not mean that attention should be paid only to the technical aspects of project management, such as allocating people to projects using simulation models, or project-specific technical training. Rather, attention should be focused on the importance of the project as a site of work activity from the perspectives of motivation, ability, opportunity, well-being, fairness, and development, which are core to HRM theorizing in general. Undoubtedly, some of these issues are beginning to attract researchers' attention (Bredin, 2008; Pinto et al., 2014), but much remains to be done.

A stronger emphasis on HRM specifically focused at the project level would be a positive development for the following reasons. First, the current discussion in mainstream HRM theorizing focuses on the difference between intended and implemented HRM practices (Nishii & Wright, 2007; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). A

focus on HRM activities specifically in projects can address a gap between the kinds of HRM processes and practices at an organizational-, network-, and macrostructure level as reported by HRM managers, and those practices and processes that multiple actors are engaged in day to day, in terms of project HRM. Line managers and project managers have different perspectives on how HRM is implemented. These perspectives need to be acknowledged and, where necessary, aligned.

Second, HRM practices at the project level are the practices that are most proximal to workers. These are the practices that workers perceive and encounter. They may therefore have large effects in terms of outcomes of interest, including project and organizational performance. In terms of the well-being of project professionals, fairness and the sustainability of work practices are important (Ehnert, 2009). More team-based research would also be valuable, given the growing prominence of project-based work in general, and especially in knowledge-based industries.

However, to the extent that HRM theorists have begun to systematically address the project work context, in the past few years we observe that this has mainly been from a managerialist perspective (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Greenwood, 2013). The emphasis is focused on how to improve the functioning of organizations by developing appropriate HRM systems to enhance efficiency and effectiveness of resource deployment and development. Swart and Kinnie (2014, p. 293) argue, for example, that “[t]he raison d’être of a configuration of HRM practices is to enable effective working both individually and collectively,” and put forward an organizational and managerial perspective.

The theoretical perspectives that dominate the study of HRM in OPM are quite narrow compared with the range of theories used generally in the HRM field that



include theoretical approaches from both managerial and critical perspectives (Deetz, 1996). While managerial and unitarist perspectives tend to dominate HRM research (Keegan & Boselie, 2006; Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, & Drake, 2009; Marchington, 2015), there has been a broadening of perspectives in recent years to include critical HRM perspectives (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010); ethical HRM perspectives (Greenwood, 2013; Guest & Woodrow, 2012); and perspectives such as sustainable HRM (Ehnert, 2009; Kramar, 2014). To date, these theoretical lenses have not been widely adopted by theorists studying HRM in OPM.

One exception is the article by Asquin et al. (2010) exploring the question of when project-based management causes distress to actors in the organization. The authors focus on the emergence of “dual” organizations and argue that the use of projects to achieve competitive advantage has a cost for organizations as well as employees in HR systems. Both have to evolve in order to accommodate new and more cross-cutting operating systems that challenge their personnel in many ways. Considering that permanent and temporary organization coexist, they argue that the HRM function needs to move from a uniform bureaucratic model to flexible and tailor-made, temporary, project-based HR support: “[t]hus an organization’s ability to operate effectively on a cross-functional basis relies on the ability of HRM systems to incentivize and recognize the human resources involved in activities that diverge from the standard organizational models” (Asquin et al., 2010, p. 172). There is much opportunity still for enriching the field of HRM in OPM with insights on issues such as worker health-related well-being associated with HRM systems (Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012) and sustainable employment practices (Ehnert, 2009) in project-based organizations. Whether and how discourses of HRM and/or OPM enable or constrain balanced

attention to well-being and ethical HRM issues as well as performance HRM issues is a question that requires further exploration. If studies on the emerging “textscape” of HRM business partnering are an accurate reflection, then prevailing managerial discourses of HRM constrain discussion and debate on well-being and ethical HRM issues (Keegan & Francis, 2010). Given that project-based organizations are characterized by both uncertainty and ambiguity, which is likely to influence employees’ experiences of their workplace in not always a positive way (e.g., Pinto et al., 2014; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006), explicit attention to employee issues of well-being and ethical treatment are very important (Greenwood, 2013). Structural breaks between temporary and permanent parts of the organization require balancing many aspects such as short-term- and long-term orientation, stakeholders with different interests, social and economic interests, and individual and organizational interests (Huemann, 2015). These are likely to create pressures at emotional and cognitive levels for organizational members. However, project management discourses themselves, which are highly rationalistic and functionalistic (cf. Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006) in orientation, may constrain attention to these aspects. This is also worth considering in future research endeavors.

Within the more traditional managerial domain, HRM research is inspired by a wide variety of micro- and macrotheories (Wright & Boswell, 2002), including economic theories (e.g., resource-based view, human capital theory), institutional theory (Boselie, Brewster, & Paauwe, 2009), and in the past ten years especially organizational psychology and organizational behavior theories (Godard, 2014; Marchington, 2015). The focus on employee behavior as a key factor mediating the link between HRM practices and organizational performance is now one of the main topics

in HRM theorizing (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). A focus on individual behavior includes attention to the importance of organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs); e.g., helping and courtesy, proactivity, prosocial behavior, etc. Factors contributing to individuals' motivation, ability and opportunity to perform are seen as critical foci for HRM research in the mainstream literature (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). However, these theoretical approaches are only beginning to inform writing on HRM and OPM. Pinto et al.'s (2014) study on how managerial and supervisory support buffers employees' well-being is one of the rare studies informed by an organizational behavior (OB) perspective on HRM in a project setting (Geare et al., 2014).

Overall, project management research on the topic of HRM is still mainly approached from a narrow technical perspective focused on efficiency in resource allocation in project management. The use of critical theoretical perspectives on HRM in OPM is not well developed and this contrasts greatly with developments in the broader field of HRM. There is evidence in current research of an emphasis on unitarism and managerialism, and these perspectives could usefully be challenged or at least supplemented by more critical theoretical perspectives (e.g., Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006). Perspectives on HRM in OPM that pursue a stakeholder perspective and emphasize issues such as fairness and legitimacy (Godard, 2010) would also be merited in a context where it appears that employees and managers often confront serious challenges in terms of levels of work stress and intensity (e.g., Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). Given that the wider field of project management has begun to systematically incorporate insights from critical theory (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006) perhaps there is potential for a more critical or dissensus-oriented perspective on HRM in OPM to be developed in the future (Keegan & Boselie, 2006). The incorporation of a capabilities

theoretical perspective for HRM (Bredin, 2008) is also promising as an indication that new insights on HRM in a project-based context are being developed, as is the focus on the individual employee level and the incorporation of a perspective on well-being in the recent work of Pinto et al. (2014).

In terms of research designs and methodologies, most work on HRM and project-based organizations is centered on fairly conventional qualitative and quantitative methods. Interview-based (e.g., Keegan et al., 2012) and case study approaches (e.g., Bredin & Söderlund, 2011) are common. Studies based on surveys (e.g., Calamel et al., 2012) are also common.

Less evident as research methods are, for example, (critical) discourse analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; Keegan & Francis, 2010), multilevel statistical analysis (Sanders, Shipton, & Gomes, 2014), diary studies (Tadić, Bakker, & Oerlemans, 2014), and ethnographies (McCann, Granter, Hassard, & Hyde, 2014), to name just a few. We see potential for enriching the study of HRM in OPM when researchers expand their repertoire of methods to explore novel and interesting research questions in a contextually sensitive way, developing new knowledge in this emerging field of management activity.

## A Research Agenda for HRM in OPM

Based on our discussion of current issues and the trends in the literature on HRM in OPM we have presented, we use this section to offer a research agenda based on four sets of priorities that we see as salient for the development of this field of study. These priorities demonstrate a need for a broader range of theoretical lenses to study HRM in OPM, for broader research methods and designs, for the range of actors involved, and

their interactions, and finally for the dynamic and paradoxical aspects of managing HRM in OPM.

## A Broader Range of Theoretical Lenses for Studying HRM in OPM

The HRM literature, whether mainstream, critical, or ethical in orientation, provides rich intellectual resources for HRM research and theorizing in the context of project-based organizations. Insights from mainstream OB-inspired HRM can enrich our understanding of the roles of line and project managers in facilitating employee behavior (Keegan & Den Hartog, 2004; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Insights from critical management studies, for example, from labor process perspectives, remind us of the conflicting outcomes in HRM systems, which are currently at least as plausible as mutual gains (Ehrnrooth & Björkman, 2012; Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000). Research on the differences between intended, enacted, and perceived HRM practices are likely to help us understand the gaps that may occur between the development of HRM policies and how individual workers perceive them (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii & Wright, 2007). However, we caution against the wholesale importing of ideas from mainstream and critical or ethical HRM as, without adequate recontextualization to a project setting, this is not likely to lead to insights that help researchers or practitioners.

To that extent, a thorough understanding of the literature on project management, project management philosophy and discourse, and project based/project-oriented organizations from a contextual perspective is essential. This should underpin systematic and novel theoretical insights on HRM in OPM. Finally,

although social systems theory has rarely been used in research on OPM and HRM, we see potential for further development of this perspective (Huemann, 2015).

## **A Broader Range of Research Methods for Studying HRM in OPM**

Mainstream OB-inspired HRM research drawing on sophisticated multilevel analysis can be of value in testing if the outcomes found in nonproject contexts that are linked to HRM practices are replicated in a project context. There are gaps in our knowledge currently about how HRM actors in project settings interact (Keegan & Den Hartog, 2004). Understanding of their priorities as well as the values shaping them (Pohler & Willness, 2014) is not well developed. Inductive and context-sensitive research methods are needed. The use of discourse analysis, for example, is low in studies of HRM in a project setting. Discourse analytic studies have been valuable in showing how the framing of HRM practices can lead to certain practices and processes developing in organizations compared with others (e.g., practices and processes for protecting employees) (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Watson, 2010). Discourse analysis could help reveal the values framing how project and line managers orient to the HRM roles and what priorities are emphasized in a project setting as well as how these link to broader societal discourses (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000).

## **Attention to a Broader Range of Actors Involved in HRM in OPM**

Mainstream HRM writing is increasingly acknowledging the importance of multiactor HRM systems (Meijerink et al., 2013). The emerging research on the range of HRM

actors in a project-based organization can clearly inform this type of research. Insights on how they interact and coordinate their activities would be welcome (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011; Keegan et al., 2012; Swart & Kinnie, 2014). This is a highly dynamic area of HRM in OPM. The complexity of HRM roles and tasks, and influence distribution between actors are only slowly beginning to emerge. Much more research is required to untangle the interactive effects of project, line management, employee, and HRM interactions in terms of the outcomes they shape. Research in this complex field is currently rare (cf. Den Hartog, De Hoogh, & Keegan, 2007) but likely to be of practical and theoretical value to understanding how HRM might facilitate OPM as well as the outcomes for employees of management practices and processes in this field.

## **The Need for Increased Focus on Dynamic Aspects of HRM for OPM**

The dynamic aspects of linking project HRM and the broader organizational aspects of HRM, and also to the experiences of individual project professionals and workers, are currently undertheorized. Recent research suggests the importance of linking not only project and organizational HRM, or project and individual-level outcomes, but also of placing project organizational HRM in an even broader context of the networks and project ecologies (Grabher, 2004) within which project-based organizations are embedded (cf. Swart & Kinnie, 2014). This indicates a vast area of research that still needs to be done in terms of how HRM unfolds at different levels in the organization and the linkages between these levels. Further, this research is required not just to ensure the development of the project management body of knowledge but also the development of the HRM body of knowledge, which must gradually adapt its orientation

towards organizations to consider more systematically the importance of context generally, and particularly the contexts of the project, and the project-based organization.

## Conclusion

The topic of HRM in OPM is an important and dynamically emerging area of research. In this chapter we have discussed that it is increasingly common for work activities to take place in projects and described research on the links between HRM activities that occur on projects and broader implications for project based organizations. While it is clear that, to date, the implications of project-based organizing for managing human resources are somewhat underexplored, we see trends suggesting that HRM aspects of project organizations are beginning to attract sustained systematic attention. Findings from recent research on HRM in OPM suggest that research on HRM at the project level is gaining attention in light of the idea of the project as temporary organization (Turner & Müller, 2003). The attention being paid to HRM at a broader organizational and network level (Swart & Kinnie, 2014), reflecting the ideas of projects and project professionals as embedded in a broader, more permanent context (Sydow, Lindkvist, & DeFillippi, 2004), is also a critical area of development and fertile discussion. The multiactor nature of HRM in project-based organizations aligns with well-developed discussions in mainstream HRM writing on the increased tendency to devolve HRM to line managers (e.g., Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Renwick, 2003). The increasing importance of other actors in HRM systems that has gained attention in mainstream HRM theorizing in recent years (Meijerink et al., 2013) is clearly of great importance in understanding HRM in OPM.



We have offered suggestions for research on HRM in OPM to increase our knowledge and enrich our insights on this important area. Broader theoretical insights, more and innovative research methods, and research that goes beyond managerialism, are all potentially valuable for improving the quality of research on HRM in OPM. Finally, we encourage an increased focus on the dynamic and emergent aspects of HRM in OPM to provide insights that shed light on how project workers and managers can cope cognitively and emotionally with the uncertain and ambiguous aspects of working and managing human resources in this setting, which is linked with dualistic short- and long-term pressures, and contradictory people and project performance pressures. Finally, there is reason to be optimistic that with a willingness on the part of researchers to adopt wider theoretical perspectives, and draw insights from critical as well as mainstream HRM research methods and findings, the prospects for future research on HRM in OPM are positive indeed.

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