

What employees see as the motivations of HR management affects their wellbeing

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Imagine that you're chairing a very important meeting at work. You've invited your boss, two important clients, and your direct report, Sam. Sam flies into the meeting room approximately 25 minutes late. How do you react? Your initial response likely includes a combination of frustration, embarrassment, and disappointment. Then again, your response might depend on *why* you believe Sam was late. If you knew he had a child with health challenges, this reason may influence the way that you feel about his behaviour. Sometimes it's not what someone actually *does* that matters, but instead, what really influences your thoughts about the person and behaviour are the reasons that you ascribe for *why* the person did it in the first place.

This is the essence of *attribution theory*. In the earliest stages of the theory's development, [Heider \(1958\)](#) suggested that people act like novice scientists who are constantly trying to understand others' behaviour by piecing together information about the person and the environment until they arrive at a reasonable cause for the behaviour. In other words, attribution theory posits that people try to determine why other people do what they do.

My colleagues and I borrowed from this idea to try to untangle a longstanding debate in the field of human resource management (HRM): Do HRM practices (e.g., training, performance management, incentives) lead to higher or lower levels of employee wellbeing? On the one hand, *unitarist scholars* support the proposition that organisational and employee goals can be aligned, and what is good for the organisation is good for the employee. From this perspective, HRM practices increase employee wellbeing because they provide employees with the ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform well in their jobs. Conversely, *pluralist scholars* suggest that there are fundamental and irreconcilable differences between management and employees. HRM practices are seen as a way to control and monitor employees and therefore leads to their exploitation, increased effort without commensurate compensation, and to lower levels of wellbeing.

Interestingly, past empirical findings support both camps. Although there are likely a host of reasons for these mixed

results (e.g., how HRM practices are measured, the manner in which HRM practices are implemented), my colleagues and I examined an alternative way to explain these conflicting findings by leveraging attribution theory. We were not the first to apply attribution theory to the HRM context; [Lisa Nishii and her colleagues](#) developed *HRM attribution theory* and argued that employees react to HRM practices based on the attributions they make regarding the organisation's purpose in implementing the practices.

Let's return to Sam to embed our theory and predictions. Imagine that you're interested in the effect of HRM practices in your organisation on Sam's wellbeing. Asking him to describe HRM practices (i.e. *does a formal appraisal system exist in my organisation?*), or evaluate the HRM practices (i.e. *is my performance appraisal fair and accurate?*) will likely elicit quite different responses from Sam than asking for attributions of HRM practices (i.e. *why does my organisation use performance appraisals?*).

In our study, we focused on the "why" on two counts – we asked employees to rate the extent to which they thought that their organisation's HRM practices were designed to (1) increase job performance (HRM-performance attributions) and to (2) reduce costs (HRM-cost attributions).

Imagine Sam has a HRM-performance attribution. In this case, he positively interprets the organisation's intent in developing HRM practices; they signal to him that he is important and valuable and that the organisation believes in him. This leads Sam to become further involved in the role, identify with the work, and have more resources to deploy. In this case, he is likely to experience job involvement, leading to higher levels of wellbeing.

Now consider that Sam holds HRM cost-attributions. Here he infers that the organisation is interested in minimizing spending by withholding resources and increasing demands; he believes the organisation expects him to work toward unachievable deadlines and manage conflicting commitments. In other words, Sam feels that he must do more with less. This creates a negative environment where he feels overloaded with work and is stressed out.

In other words, we tested whether Sam's wellbeing is a function of his perceptions regarding *why* the organisation implemented its HRM practices.

At a large construction and consultancy organisation in the UK, 180 employees answered two questionnaires that were administered 12 months apart. The results of our analyses of this survey data corroborated our theory. Specifically, we found that employees who believed that their organisation's HRM practices were designed to increase their performance were more likely to be involved in their job, leading to higher levels of wellbeing. Conversely, those who believed that HRM practices were designed to decrease costs felt burdened by their work, and had lower levels of wellbeing.

The findings of our research has direct implications for how organisations communicate the intent of the HRM practices that they administer. If employees perceive that these practices are meant to reduce costs – regardless of the actual strategic intentions – they experience increased workload and emotional exhaustion.

But what if HRM practices are actually designed to increase performance *and* reduce costs? Should organisations purposefully deny a cost motive? That's probably an unwise decision because most employees understand the reality that HRM policies and practices must be designed with an eye on cost in order for the organisation to remain financially competitive. Honest leadership is credible and therefore more persuasive.

In conclusion, it behooves HRM practitioners to understand employee attributions of HRM policies and practices, develop a strategy for how they wish the policies and practices to be viewed by employees, and ensure that they communicate their intended message.

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Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [The effect of HRM attributions on emotional exhaustion and the mediating roles of job involvement and work overload](#), co-authored with Lilith Arevshatian, Kerstin Alfes and Catherine Bailey, in *Human Resource Management Journal*, 26 (2), 172-191. (2016)
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