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Define the term HRM and outline the debate on whether the strategic use of HRM practises can improve organisational performance

Introduction

There are many business functions that can help to increase an organisations performance and create a competitive advantage, including: operations, marketing, sales and HRM (Yeo, 2003).

This essay will define the term human resource management, and provide a critical discussion on how it can be used as a strategic tool for improving an organisation performance.

Defining HRM

Human resource management can be defined as "all activities related to the management of employment relationships in the firm", with strategic HRM being able to "provides firms with the internal capacity to adapt and adjust to their competitive environments by aligning HRM policies and practices" (Dabic, et al., 2011, p. 15).

In addition to this, Ahmad & Schroeder (2003, p. 19) defined HRM as "a set of distinct but interrelated activities, functions, and processes that are directed at attracting, developing, and maintaining (or disposing of) a firm's human resources".

Ultimately, both of the aforementioned definitions underpin the core concepts and definition of HRM, with it being the process for managing people within an organisation. Human capital is referred to as the combined knowledge and skills of an organisations workforce, and is often considered one of the most important assets for a firm (Collins & Clark, 2003). This further solidifies the importance for understanding the management of human resources, and how different activities can be enforced to retain human capital and build upon it within future operational processes.

Strategic Use of HRM

As previously mentioned, HRM can be strategically used to create a competitive advantage and improve an organisations performance through many different ways. However, the most significant ways of doing this is through employee related metrics, such as motivation, satisfaction, development, talent retention, conflict management, benefit systems and job design.

Furthermore, the additional way that HRM can also be used to improve organisational performance is through leadership, with many different leadership styles being found to have pragmatic benefits on the performance of employees and the organisation. Leadership development offers a way to nurture the employee-related variables, and ensure that the development of a competitive advantage can be sustained and improved upon.

Employee Motivation/Satisfaction

No matter which strategy the HRM function is pursuing, the underlying reason will usually be to improve employee motivation, satisfaction and/or engagement. These are three key variables that will help bolster the individual performance of an employee, which will ultimately have drastic impacts on how the organisation performance. Therefore, HRM must effectively identify appropriate factors that will help improve the motivational and satisfaction levels of their employees, although this may be challenging to achieve to their subjective nature (Koys, 2001).

Performance & Talent Management

The HRM function should always aim to improve employee performance and nurture incoming talent. This is one of the most significant responsibilities of HRM and can hold the largest impacts on the levels of human capital and organisational performance. Building human capital through performance development and talent management can rapidly improve innovation and individual performance, both of which will positively correlate with organisational performance (Judge, et al., 2001; Hitt, et al., 2001).

Performance management can be framed within many different models, such as the performance management cycle, coaching or mentoring and performance review cycle. These methods provide a cyclical process for strategizing, monitoring and improving an individual's performance, with these models being most effective when created individually for an employee (Atkinson & Shaw, 2006).

Conflict Management

Another imperative aspect of HRM to help improve and sustain organisational performance is conflict management, which handles and resolves any disputes or disagreements between employees. This can be achieved through a plethora of different strategies, including: mediation, arbitration, litigation, or adjudication (Deutsch, et al., 2011).

Identifying the most appropriate strategy is the biggest challenge of conflict management, as it can be hard to deduce whether external involvement is necessary. Smaller conflicts can often be solved through internal meetings and mediation counselling, whereas larger concerns may need to employ the aid of an external tribunal (Barki & Hartwick, 2001).

Furthermore, conflict can be categorised as functional and dysfunctional. It is dysfunctional conflict that often requires attention by HRM systems, as functional conflict can result in idea generation and innovation. Therefore, identifying types of conflict is also imperative for the HRM function to identify whether they must intervene to sustain performance, or can allow functional conflict to occur with the intention of improving performance (Massey & Dawes, 2007).

Benefits & Rewards

Benefits and rewards are often linked with the psychological contract, which involves the employee subjectively perceived contract on agreement exchanges between themselves and the organisation. If an organisation violates this contract then it can have numerous negative impacts on an employee's commitment and engagement with their working responsibilities, which can negatively impact organisational performance (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Grant & Sumanth, 2009). To avoid a breach of contract, or minimise an impact if a breach occurs, relevant tangible and intangible benefits should be offered to employees. This helps to support a positive psychological contract within employees, which will in turn result in improvements in organisational performance. However, appropriate reward systems may also be subjective to the employee, but can be implemented through several different methods, including: pay, holidays, maternity/paternity leave, company car or expenses (O'Neill & Adya, 2007; Bal, et al., 2010).

Job Design

Job design is often overlooked for contributing to organisational performance, but can impact employee engagement and commitment. Therefore, HRM should ensure that jobs are designed effectively to ensure that the organisation is employing the right individuals. 'Best fit' is a common concept within HRM, and revolves around an organisations ability to hire the most optimum employees. Job design plays a significant role in this, and is also supported by effective recruitment and selection strategies (Paul & Anantharaman, 2003).

Leadership

There is a plethora of leadership styles that can help improve employee motivation, satisfaction, engagement and performance. Task-orientated styles are considered traditional approaches, with there being four contemporary styles that can help develop and sustain employee related metrics. This includes:

Transformational: Lowe, et al., (1996, p. 385) defines transformational leadership for articulating "a vision of the future that can be shared with peers and subordinates, intellectually stimulates subordinates, and pays high attention to individual differences among people". This is one of the most commonly found leadership styles, and helps develop employee relationships, understand intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, and further engage employees with their working responsibilities. The theory faces few criticisms, aside potential abuse of power from the leader, and can have drastic impacts on organisational performance (Hall, et al., 2002; Stones, et al., 2004).

Transactional: The transactional approach is somewhat traditional, and adopts a task-driven focus for effectively managing human capital. This is supported through the effective development of employee-manager exchanges, whereby the transactional leader will reward employees for meeting relevant goals. Although this does adopt a specific focus on organisational performance, it fails to understand the value for managing conflicts, improving motivation and nurturing talent (Barbuto, 2005; Amabile, 1998).

Distributive: Harris (2003, p. 313) defines the distributive leadership style for implying "a different power relationship within the organisation where the distinctions between followers and leaders tend to blur". This adapts the traditional power constructs within an organisation, and attempts to place responsibility and leadership within all employees to help bolster creativity and innovation. However, this can result in employees becoming disengaged and complacent, and usually still needs some form of control and guidance by top management (Bolden, 2011).

Adaptive: The adaptive approach has become more common within turbulent and volatile industries, such as the technological industry. It ultimately relies on a leader to adapt people operations and activities to industry change, and effectively mobilises employees to tackle tough challenges (Spence, 2009, p. 2). Although this may not directly improve organisational performance, it is a leadership style that can help sustain performance through turbulent and uncertain times. Furthermore, it is often cited that this approach should be combined with other styles, as it can be seen as only a facilitation role when utilised alone (Carroll, et al., 2008).

Each of these four styles have their critiques, but each can provide a unique approach to human resource management within several different industries. Understanding which style is most appropriate for the defined situation can be the most challenging aspect of leadership within HRM, as fast-paced technology

industries may prefer an adaptive approach, whereas creative industry may support a distributive approach (Mehmood & Arif, 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is clearly a substantial amount of different way in which HRM can be used to improve the performance of an organisation, which is why it is considered such a vital function within business operations. This is mainly accomplished through the development of employee related metrics with the support of effective leadership.

However, it is also important to understand that a failure to mention these different aspects can actually result in HRM having a negative impact on organisation performance. This is because discontent within the workforce will likely negatively impact individual performance, which will be detrimental to the overall performance and objectives of the organisation. Therefore, this underpins the importance for rigidly managing the HRM function, and ensuring that appropriate strategies are being implemented and maintained to improve individual and organisational performance.

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