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Different routes to successful HRM implementation: A realist synthesis

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TITLE

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ABSTRACT

HR practices with high quality contents do not necessarily result in positive individual and organisational outcomes due to shortcomings in their implementation. This intended-implemented gap has resulted in the shift from content-focused to process-focused perspective in addressing the HRM black box which has brought the concepts of HRM implementation and its effectiveness to the fore. While more attention has been paid to effective implementation of HR practices and the topic of HRM implementation in recent years, there is still a lack of a systematic understanding of how and why implementation of HR practices succeeds or fails. As such, to unfold the HRM black box, a comprehensive and exhaustive review of the mechanisms through which effective implementation is achieved, the contextual factors that influence the operation of such mechanisms, and the outcomes that such mechanisms produce is required. In this study, a Realist Synthesis is conducted to identify and synthesise existing evidence from the empirical studies of HRM implementation into Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations of each involved actor. These CMO configurations enhance the understanding of ‘what works for whom in which circumstances?’ regarding HRM implementation. As such, this Realist Synthesis clarifies what is dealt with in HRM implementation and contributes to designing, executing, and evaluating future HR practices and their implementations.

INTRODUCTION

In addressing the HRM black box -relating HRM to firm performance-, traditionally the focus has been on the content of HR practices (Boselie et al., 2005; Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013; Paauwe & Boselie, 2005; Paauwe & Richardson, 1997), mainly considering high performance work systems as HR practices that positively impact organisational outcomes (Chow, 2012; Combs et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2012). But good HR practices do not necessarily result in positive individual and organisational outcomes. For instance, Woodrow and Guest (2014) reported that a high quality HR practice negatively affected the well-being and performance of employees due to its poor implementation. Since the mere quality of HR practices is not enough to achieve positive individual and organisational outcomes, there has been a shift from focusing on the *content* of HR practices to the *process* when dealing with HRM implementation (Katou et al., 2014; Sanders et al., 2014; Steffensen et al., 2019).

With this shift in perspective, HRM implementation is considered as a dynamic process encompassing different stages of adoption, shaping the policy and routinising it (Trullen et al., 2020; van Mierlo et al., 2018), through which various actors (Mirfakhar et al., 2018) with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests (Gilbert et al., 2015) are involved. The diverse actors influencing HRM implementation range from HR professionals (Trullen et al., 2016) as the process owners, to line managers (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Gilbert et al., 2015; Katou et al., 2021; Nishii & Paluch, 2018; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) as the main implementers (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013), senior managers (Boada-Cuerva et al., 2019; Mirfakhar et al., 2021), employees (Budjanovcanin, 2018; Chen et al., 2021), and even unions (Gill, 2009). This complex amalgam of different stages and actors results in a situation prone to failure, i.e., the intended-implemented gap (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Piening et al., 2014), hence derailing from effective HRM implementation. In this complex situation of

dealing with multiple stages and various actors, exploring the mechanisms through which implementation of HR practices work effectively is of quite importance.

Despite the growth in number of studies focusing on HRM implementation in recent years, and a dedicated special issue to the topic (i.e., Bondarouk et al., 2018), we still lack systematic literature reviews (Trullen et al., 2020), especially a systematic understanding of what influences the success or failure of implementation of HR practices. While there has been a review on the antecedents of HRM implementation (Mirfakhar et al., 2018) and few studies that have looked at contextual factors at macro, mezzo, and micro levels (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Farndale & Sanders, 2017; Gilliland & Schepers, 2003; Sikora & Ferris, 2014), a comprehensive review of the *mechanisms* through which effective implementation can be achieved and the *context* that influence the operation of such mechanisms is required. Studying contextual factors is specifically crucial as Brandl, Keegan, and Kozica (2022) have recently argued that institutional environment of organisations, as a contextual factor, impacts the implementation efforts in organisations and hence the intended-implemented gap. Following institutional theory, they argued that pursuing legitimacy -i.e., tendencies to use HR policies that can be recognised by others and known to be rational- results in isomorphism, in other words, organisations adopting similar HR practices, which may not necessarily have been designed in a way to address the organisational needs. Therefore, focusing on contextual factors may open new avenues in exploring further the shortcomings of effective HRM implementation. In addition to the mechanisms of effective HRM implementations and their influencing contextual factors, studying the outcomes of effective implementation of HR practices would help with clarifying implementation effectiveness. Given these, in this study, we explore ‘what works for whom in which circumstances?’ regarding HRM implementation using Realist Synthesis.

Realist Synthesis is a theory-driven, qualitative, evidence-based literature review (Pawson et al., 2005) that seeks to answer the question of ‘what works for whom in which circumstances?’. This is done by identifying the underlying *Mechanisms* associated with HRM implementation in the literature (i.e., what made the implementation of HR practices work), the *Contexts* under which the mechanisms operated (i.e., the conditions in which the HRM implementations were effective), and the patterns of *Outcomes* produced (i.e., the observed improvements in individual and organisational outcomes) (Pawson et al., 2005). These form Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations (where Context + Mechanisms = Outcomes). Realist Synthesis is suitable for dealing with the heterogeneity of results, and since in HRM implementation we deal with such heterogeneity, using Realist Synthesis allows reflection on the contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes that underlie this variation (Pawson et al., 2005).

This Realist Synthesis aims to identify and synthesise empirical evidence from the HRM implementation literature into CMO configurations. To achieve this aim, the objectives of this Realist Synthesis are to: identify empirical studies on HRM implementation; explore the research aims and methodologies of these studies; extract themes of contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes; and develop CMO configurations. Given the aim and objectives, the overall research question of this Realist Synthesis is ‘*Which CMO configurations can be developed based on the empirical evidence from HRM implementation literature?*’. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first realist synthesis to integrate empirical evidence from HRM implementation into CMO configurations. Consequently, the contribution of this study is three-fold: Firstly, this study presents the cause-consequence relationships in HRM implementation, something which was missing in the literature. Secondly, since HRM implementation is a multi-actor process, the cause-consequence (i.e., CMO) configurations are presented for each actor involved, which also depicts the causal links between perceptions

and behaviours of each actor in the implementation process. Thirdly, these CMO configurations help develop, implement, and evaluate future HRM implementation as they enhance the understanding of what works for whom in which circumstances.

METHODS

A realist synthesis is concerned with developing and refining CMO configurations (Pawson et al., 2005). This review approach focuses on linking contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes in a process of systematically and iteratively synthesising empirical evidence from the relevant literature (Wong et al., 2013). This realist synthesis entails six steps (Pawson, 2006): (1) identifying a review question; (2) formulating an initial CMO configuration; (3) searching for primary studies; (4) selecting the studies and appraising their quality; (5) extracting, analysing, and synthesising relevant data; and, (6) refining the initial CMO configuration. We addressed the first step in the introduction, we report the next steps below. We report our study according to the RAMESES publication standards that was developed with the aim of enhancing consistency, transparency, and rigour of reporting of realist syntheses (Wong et al., 2013).

Formulating the initial CMO configuration

The first and second authors formulated an initial CMO configuration. This process involved a scoping literature search in combination with discussing insights to formulate the initial CMO configuration. The first and second authors started with searching for literature reviews on HRM implementation (i.e., Mirfakhar et al., 2018; Trullen et al., 2020). They read and discussed these reviews to identify the main mechanisms of HRM implementations and to determine the search terms. Given the various mechanisms of HRM implementations, it was decided not to limit the search to any specific mechanism to ensure a comprehensive search. As such, the initial CMO configuration was formulated, at an abstract level, as: ‘HRM

implementation work through different mechanisms which bring about various outcomes in different contexts’.

Searching for primary studies

A systematic literature search was conducted to refine the initial CMO configuration. While systematic literature search is not usually used in realist syntheses, it was conducted to limit the search process. The search was performed in Scopus, Business Source Complete via Ebsco, ProQuest/ Social Science Database, PsycArticles and PsycINFO via OvidSP, Web of Science/ Social Science Citation Index in March 2022.

Two search terms of ‘human resource management’ and ‘implementation’ were used; free text words (truncated as required) in combination with Boolean operators “OR” and “AND” were used. We applied two exclusion criteria, non-English language papers and studies pre-2000 (since HRM implementation can be considered as a relatively new concept in the HRM literature) were excluded during our search in the databases. Appendix A shows the search queries in the databases and Figure 1 displays the search process in a flow diagram.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Selecting studies and appraising their quality

The systematic search resulted in 10988 articles. We removed 355 duplicates. The remaining 10633 were title and abstract screened independently by the first and second authors. Only empirical studies on HRM implementation were included. After title screening, 10053 articles were excluded and after abstract screening, 238 more articles were removed resulting in 342 articles which were kept.

By following RAMESES publication standards, the full-text screening of the remained 342 articles entailed two stages: first, applying inclusion criteria and, second, appraising quality.

In the first stage, we applied four inclusion criteria: 1) study focus: we included empirical articles that reported any mechanism of HRM implementation; 2) study design: we accepted any study design including longitudinal, cross-sectional, and one-time single case studies; 3) type of data, we included studies which used qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods; 4) we included articles from journals with quality ratings of 4*, 4, and 3 according to Association of Business School (ABS) academic journal quality guide 2021. After applying inclusion criteria, the first and second authors discussed their disagreements on 12 articles in a meeting and agreed to exclude four of them and finally retained 59 articles.

In the second stage, we assessed the quality of the 59 articles. According to the RAMESES publication standards, realist quality appraisal is done through assessing the relevance and rigour of the evidence that can be used in the realist synthesis (Wong et al., 2013). First, relevance was assessed by examining whether the included articles contain data that can be used to refine the initial CMO configuration. Studies with rich data on how HRM implementation influence outcomes were classified as ‘thick’ and were prioritised for the synthesis. Studies with limited such data but containing evidence like contextual factors were categorised as ‘thin’ and were used to better refine the initial CMO configuration. Second, rigour was assessed by examining whether the methods to collect and analyse data were credible and trustworthy. The first and second authors independently assessed relevance and rigour of the 59 article and excluded seven articles for insufficient relevance. Both authors agreed on the final inclusion of 52 articles.

Extracting, analysing, and synthesising relevant data

Data was extracted, analysed, and synthesised as follows. To extract data, the first and second authors independently extracted data about mechanisms of HRM implementation, contextual

factors, and outcomes. Mechanisms were classified as process and content (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Process mechanisms referred to the process of implementing HR practices and content mechanisms referred to the content of the HR practices (i.e., HR practices, policies, and features of the HR system) (i.e., the HR policies) which were studied in the articles. To analyse data, the first and second authors focused on process and content mechanisms and their causally relevant contextual factors and outcomes. Process mechanisms were analysed based on perceptions and behaviours of senior managers, HR department, line managers, and employees in planning and implementing HRM implementations. This is done as realist synthesis considers stakeholders' functions to be paramount in determining why an implementation succeed or fail (Pawson et al., 2004; Pawson & Tilley, 2004). To synthesise data, the first and second authors reported how each mechanism was operated, which contextual factors influenced the operation of the mechanisms, and what outcomes were produced. For mechanisms, we considered two constructs of perception -which involves the reception, processing, and interpretation of information related to HRM implementation- and and behaviour -which involves execution of actions to implement HRM- of each of the stakeholders (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018). For contexts, we categorised contextual factors into various levels (Miraglia & Johns, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2018) namely individual, leader, organisational, and overarching levels. For outcomes, we considered three categories of proximal outcomes (e.g., employees' and/or managers' perception), intermediate outcomes (e.g., changes in HR practices and HRM situation), and distal outcomes (e.g., changes in employees' wellbeing and organisational performance) (Roodbari et al., 2022). If in a study, a group of mechanisms produced the outcomes and there was no causal link between a specific mechanism to a specific outcome, we attributed the outcomes to all mechanisms.

The processes of data extraction, analysis, and synthesis were iterative. Regarding data extraction and analysis, the first and second authors independently extracted and analysed

data and recorded the findings in two Microsoft Excel spreadsheets saved in a Google Drive. Regarding data synthesis, the first and second authors, together in ten meetings, checked the findings in excel sheets against all included articles and synthesised the analysed data into five CMO configurations. As such, through ongoing, iterative processes of data extraction, analysis, and synthesis as required by the RAMESES publication standards (Wong et al., 2013), we refined the initial CMO configuration by developing five empirical CMO configurations.

FINDINGS

Document Characteristics

The search strategies resulted in 52 rigorous and relevant HRM implementation studies. Appendix B presents countries where the studies were done, the aims of the studies, study design, methods used to collect data, and content mechanisms of the retained studies. In Realist Synthesis, findings are known as CMO configurations. In what follows, findings are categorised based on the actors involved in HRM implementation, and for each actor, following the CMO logic, the mechanisms, contexts, and outcomes are presented.

Line Managers' Involvement

Mechanisms

Line managers' involvement was a crucial mechanism in HRM implementations. In the reviewed HRM implementations, line managers' involvement had two components of perceptions and behaviours.

Line managers' perceptions were influential in their HRM implementation. Line managers' perceptions of their HRM-related competencies (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013), their internalisation of the HR practices -i.e., valuing and committing to the HR practices- (Björkman et al., 2011), and their desire and motivation to devote time and effort to the

implementation of HR practices (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2015; Katou et al., 2021; Trullen et al., 2016; Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018) were shown to be influential. Additionally, having similar perceptions as HR professionals about the degree of HR devolution (Op de Beeck et al., 2016) was another effective mechanism for line managers. Practice-wise, line managers' attitude towards HR practices (Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017), their perceptions of the intended HR practices (Kossek et al., 2016; Yang & Arthur, 2021), and their perceptions of how enabling HR is -i.e., their perception of whether HR practices assist them in their managerial responsibilities and whether they are provided with autonomy and flexibility to take local and individual needs into account when implementing HR practices- (Kuvaas et al., 2014) were among the extracted mechanisms. Furthermore, line managers' perceptions of usefulness of content and design of HRM tools, ease of use of such HRM tools, and HRM effectiveness (Bondarouk et al., 2009) played a role in influencing line managers' implementation of HR practices.

Behaviour-wise, line managers interpreted, relayed, and even created relatively clear and constant HR signals (in the presence of mixed signals) from their top managers to their employees (Townsend et al., 2012), adapted HR practices by creating 'fit' between the HR practice and organisation's needs, objectives, and structures (Makhecha et al., 2018), and implemented (enacted, delivered) HR practices (Brewster et al., 2015; Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017; Evans, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2011; Katou et al., 2021; Kulik & Perry, 2008; Makhecha et al., 2018; Perry & Kulik, 2008; Sikora et al., 2015; Vermeeren, 2014; Yang & Arthur, 2021). In addition, line managers provided support during HRM implementation (Kuvaas et al., 2014; Perry & Kulik, 2008; Stirpe et al., 2013; Straub et al., 2018; Woodrow & Guest, 2014). This support included involving employees in the HRM implementation (Straub et al., 2018) by incorporating employees' suggestions (Trullen et al., 2016); being open, clear, enthusiastic about the use of the HR practices; and considering individual's job

profile (Straub et al., 2018). Referring to AMO (Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity) framework, line managers utilised their abilities in terms of listening in non-defensive ways and having the confidence to implement HR practices (Trullen et al., 2016; Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018); and took opportunities in terms of deploying their skills and motivation and fulfilling their HR activities on top of the other demands to implement HR practices (Gilbert et al., 2015; Trullen et al., 2016; Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018). Moreover, line managers prioritised specific HR roles including employee champion (indicating concern for employee well-being) and strategic partner (working to achieve strategic goals) to influence HRM implementation (Shipton et al., 2016). Finally, line managers enacted transformational leadership (Vermeeren, 2014) and established high quality leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship with their employees when implementing HR practices (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018).

Contexts

Our review identified the factors that are necessary for line managers to be involved in HRM implementation. These factors can be grouped into individual and organisational level pre-conditions.

At the individual level, for line managers to be involved in HRM implementation, they should have motivation to do so but this motivation should not be instrumental, in other words, line managers should not adapt HR practices to align with their individual motives (Makhecha et al., 2018). Additionally, line managers should have HR competency (Makhecha et al., 2018; Sikora et al., 2015; Woodrow & Guest, 2014), political skills (Sikora et al., 2015), relational coordination (Makhecha et al., 2018), transformational leadership behaviours (Vermeeren, 2014), confidence (Woodrow & Guest, 2014), and more flexibility to change their personal attributes (Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017). Furthermore, experience-

wise, they should have more experience with HR practices (Kossek et al., 2016), adequate tenure in their current position, and more work experience within and outside of HR (Björkman et al., 2011). Finally, line managers should perceive the introduced HR practice as useful (Yang & Arthur, 2021) and the received HR training to be of high quality (Kuvaas et al., 2014).

At the organisational level, organisations should provide line managers with manageable span of control (Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2015), reasonable workload, manageable role conflict, and clear organisational strategies and supportive HR professionals to minimise role ambiguity (Evans, 2017). Regarding HRM devolution, there should be agreement/consensus between HR department's and line managers' perceptions of HR devolution (Op de Beeck et al., 2016). Organisations should have higher number of (high performance) HR practices-to trigger line managers' implementation perceptions and devolve more HR tasks to line managers-to motivate them to implement HR practices- (Gilbert et al., 2015; Sikora et al., 2015). Besides, HRM devolution is more likely when line managers have employees with higher educational levels (Vermeeren, 2014), and organisations are smaller and less unionised (Brewster et al., 2015). Organisations should have an embracing culture (Kossek et al., 2016), with an HR department that has strategic HRM capabilities (Björkman et al., 2011), high internal monitoring mechanisms (Makhecha et al., 2018), and HRM system strength (Gilbert et al., 2015; Katou et al., 2021) characterised by the presence of organisational support -e.g., senior management support- (Kossek et al., 2016; Makhecha et al., 2018; Woodrow & Guest, 2014) and clear communications by HR (Makhecha et al., 2018).

More elaborately, following AMO framework, HR department should enhance line managers' *ability* by providing support materials (e.g., manuals), HR support services (e.g.,

deployment of in-the-field HR specialists), and training (Perry & Kulik, 2008; Trullen et al., 2016); HR department should boost line managers' *motivation* by framing HR practices in appealing ways, selecting line managers based on their HR orientation, involving line managers in the development of the practices, providing recognition to line managers for good HR work (Trullen et al., 2016), and providing HRM support and capacity -e.g., time to implement HR practices- (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017; Perry & Kulik, 2008); HR department should enhance line managers' *opportunities* by hiring external consultants, seeking CEO support for the practices, exploiting windows of opportunity, ensuring the fit between HR practices and the organisational context (Trullen et al., 2016), and providing clear HR policies and procedures (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013).

Outcomes

Our review revealed that line managers' involvement contributed to various proximal, intermediate, and distal outcomes.

As proximal outcomes, line managers' involvement influenced their perception of HRM effectiveness (Bondarouk et al., 2009) and their employees perceptions of: line managers' support (Kuvaas et al., 2014), HR system strength (Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018), the culture related to the content of the HR practice (Straub et al., 2018), the presence of HR practices (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Vermeeren, 2014), and effective implementation of HR practices (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013; Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2015; Perry & Kulik, 2008; Trullen et al., 2016).

As intermediate outcomes, line managers' involvement contributes to both employees' and HR units' HRM-implementation related outcomes. Regarding employees, line managers' involvement influenced employees' acceptance of HR practices (Stirpe et al., 2013) and their satisfaction with such practices (Van Waeyenberg & Decramer, 2018). It also

led to more involvement of HR unit in the operation of organisational units and in the organisation's strategic planning (HR strategic role) which makes HR managers' construed image of the HR unit –their perceptions of the internal reputation of the HR unit– more favourable (Kulik & Perry, 2008). It also resulted in strong situation for HRM in the organisation (Townsend et al., 2012).

As distal outcomes, line managers' involvement resulted in increased employees' intrinsic motivation (Kuvaas et al., 2014), increased employees' engagement (Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017; Straub et al., 2018), enhanced employees' affective commitment (Bos-Nehles & Meijerink, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2011; Kuvaas et al., 2014; Shipton et al., 2016), more participative decision-making perceptions (Sikora et al., 2015), employees' job satisfaction (Dewettinck & Vroonen, 2017; Woodrow & Guest, 2014), reduced employees' turnover intentions (Kuvaas et al., 2014; Sikora et al., 2015; Straub et al., 2018; Woodrow & Guest, 2014), increased employees' organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Yang & Arthur, 2021), higher job performance (Sikora et al., 2015), and higher organisational unit performance (Vermeeren, 2014).

Figure 2 shows the CMO configuration based on line managers' involvement.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Employees' Involvement

Mechanisms

Employees' involvement was an important mechanism in HRM implementation. In the reviewed HRM implementations, employee involvement had two components of perceptions and behaviours.

Employees had different perceptions that influenced their HRM implementation. Employees' motivation to get involved in HRM implementation –which was based on (a) observing policies implemented and working well elsewhere (e.g., at former employers) and (b) wishing to affect organisational change for wider benefit– (Budjanovcanin, 2018) impacted HRM implementation. Additionally, employees' expectations of HRM (Piening et al., 2014) in terms of HRM value and effectiveness (Baluch et al., 2013; Bondarouk et al., 2009; Chang, 2005; Meijerink et al., 2016), justice in HR practice (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013), and usefulness (content and design) and ease of use of HRM tools (Bondarouk et al., 2009) were effective in HRM implementation. Besides, employees' HR well-being/quality attributions (e.g., the extent to which HR practices were used to promote employee well-being) vs. HR performance/cost-reduction attributions (e.g., the extent to which HR practices were used to get the most work out of employees) (Katou et al., 2021; Nishii et al., 2008; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015) were influential in HRM implementation. Overall, employees' perceptions of intended HR practices (McClean & Collins, 2019), HRM as intended by management (Sanders & Yang, 2016), implemented HR practices (Alfes et al., 2013; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Makhecha et al., 2018), and congruency between intended and implemented HRM (Piening et al., 2014) were among the extracted mechanisms.

Employees showed different behaviours in HRM implementation. It was shown that employees engaged in the design and quality assurance of the HR practice (Budjanovcanin, 2018) and adopted perspective-taking –adopting the viewpoints of others to understand their preferences and needs– when implementing HR practices (Zhang et al., 2022).

Contexts

Our review identified the necessary factors for employees' involvement in HRM implementation. These factors can be categorised into three levels: individual, leader, and organisational pre-conditions.

At the individual level, employees should have high levels of substantive attributions –the perception that HR practices are driven by “other-serving and genuinely aimed at supporting the common good”– and low levels of symbolic attributions –the perception that HR practices are driven by “self-serving and performed primarily for reputation and profit enhancement motives”– as these moderate relationship between HR practices and perspective-taking of employees (Zhang et al., 2022). They should also have more HRM competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills, and abilities) as these enhance their perception of HRM service value (Makhecha et al., 2018) and power sources (referent, information, and coercive) to influence HRM implementation (Budjanovcanin, 2018).

At the leader level, line managers should have internally oriented characteristics – including the desire and competencies for performing HR responsibilities– and externally oriented characteristics –including support and policies and procedures- when implementing HR practices (Katou et al., 2021). Also, CEO charismatic leadership should be high when implementing HR practices (McClean & Collins, 2019).

At the organisational level, there should be high communication of HR practices (Makhecha et al., 2018), agreement among HR decision-makers about HR practices (Piening et al., 2014), a high range of intended HR practices and configuration of financial, structural, and personnel resources to form HR capabilities (Piening et al., 2014), and a climate of employee trust in senior management (Farndale & Kelliher, 2013).

Outcomes

Our review revealed that employees' involvement contributed to various proximal and distal outcomes.

As proximal outcomes, employees' involvement influenced their perception of HRM (Bondarouk et al., 2009) and procedural justice (Chang, 2005) in their organisation.

As distal outcomes, employee involvement resulted in enhanced employees' work engagement (Alfes et al., 2013), commitment (Chang, 2005; Farndale & Kelliher, 2013; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Nishii et al., 2008; Sanders & Yang, 2016; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015), job efficacy (Baluch et al., 2013), and well-being (Nishii et al., 2008; Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). It also improved employees' innovative work behaviour (Alfes et al., 2013; Sanders & Yang, 2016), increased employees' OCB (Kehoe & Wright, 2013) and unit-level OCBs -OCB-helping and OCB conscientiousness- (Nishii et al., 2008), decreased employee intention to leave (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; McClean & Collins, 2019) and employees absenteeism (Kehoe & Wright, 2013), increased task performance (Alfes et al., 2013), enhanced customers satisfaction (Baluch et al., 2013; Nishii et al., 2008) and resulted in higher organisational performance (Katou et al., 2021; McClean & Collins, 2019).

In contrast, employees' involvement had some negative outcomes, for instance, higher levels of employees' HR performance attributions of HR practices resulted in higher levels of experienced job strain (Van De Voorde & Beijer, 2015), and when employees had attributions that HR practices were focused on exploiting employees, their commitment and satisfaction were negatively affected (Nishii et al., 2008).

Figure 3 shows the CMO configuration based on employees' involvement.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Senior Managers' Involvement

Mechanisms

Senior Manager involvement was a critical mechanism in HRM implementations. In the reviewed HRM implementations, senior managers involvement also had two components of perceptions and behaviours.

Senior managers' perceptions in terms of their beliefs about the content of HR practices (e.g., diversity, green HRM) (Ng & Sears, 2020; Ren et al., 2022) and their HR cause-effect beliefs –beliefs concerning the financial payoffs from investments in HR– (Arthur et al., 2016) affected HRM implementation.

Senior managers showed different behaviours in HRM implementation, mostly pro-HR practice behaviours (Ng & Sears, 2020). Typically, senior managers are known for providing support for implementing HR practices (Stirpe et al., 2013), but studies showed that senior managers also engaged in other behaviours in the three stages of HRM implementation: 1) adoption stage where senior managers either initiate, authorise, disregard, reject or discontinue the implementation (Mirfakhar et al., 2021) –an example could be their adoption of Western-style HR practices– (Frear et al., 2012), 2) formulation stage where senior managers either endorse, provide resources, provide input or request input, and 3) execution stage where senior managers either dismiss vs. legitimise, incentivise vs. disincentivise, role model, control, allow vs. prevent bypasses (Mirfakhar et al., 2021). Senior managers also indirectly influence HRM implementation by empowering HR departments via determining strategic role of HR department –structural position of HR department, HR manager profile, direct communication between CEO and HR department– (Mirfakhar et al., 2021), and creating a distinctive HR system by providing HR legitimacy, leadership, and resources,

enhancing agreements on the role of HR, and operationalising HR strategy through translating consistent HR messages and directing lower-level managers (Stanton et al., 2010).

Contexts

In our analysis, we identified three distinct levels: individual, organisational, and overarching pre-conditions which facilitate senior manager involvement in HRM implementation.

At the individual level, senior managers should have high employee-centred value-based beliefs (Arthur et al., 2016), high HRM beliefs (Mirfakhar et al., 2021), high moral values (Ng & Sears, 2020), and college education, in particular, in business management and social science (Frear et al., 2012).

At the organisational level, supervisors/line managers' support should be high (Stirpe et al., 2013).

At overarching level, dealing with specific HR practices, like green HRM, the presence of adverse external environment is reinforcing. An example of adverse external environment is the external pollution severity which strengthens the positive relationship between senior managers environmental beliefs and green human resource management (Ren et al., 2022).

Outcomes

Our analysis showed that senior managers' involvement contributed to proximal, intermediate, and distal outcomes.

As proximal outcomes, senior managers involvement influenced employees' perceptions of implemented HR practices (Arthur et al., 2016), employees' perception of senior management support for HR practices (Stirpe et al., 2013), and HR managers' positive

perception of senior managers commitment to HR practice and its implementation (Ng & Sears, 2020).

In terms of intermediate outcomes, senior managers' involvement contributed to employees' acceptance of HR practices (Stirpe et al., 2013), intensity of HR practices reported by the firm (Arthur et al., 2016), and strength of HR system (Stanton et al., 2010).

As distal outcomes, senior managers' involvement resulted in employees environmental commitment which in turn enhanced the environmental and financial performance of organisations (Ren et al., 2022).

Figure 4 shows the CMO configuration based on senior managers' involvement.

Insert Figure 4 about here

HR Department's Involvement

Mechanisms

In the reviewed articles, HR department involvement was an important mechanism in HRM implementation through different behaviours. HR department developed credibility through creating competency and trustworthiness (Stirpe et al., 2013), developed social capital consisting of structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (Kim & Ryu, 2011), and created a strong HR system by developing a communication strategy to encourage information to flow in the organisation (Stanton et al., 2010) to successfully implement HRM. HR department developed formalised written policies and translated them into practices (Woodhams & Lupton, 2006), provided written and accessible documents (Stanton et al., 2010), and adapted HR practices to fit the organisation's needs, objectives, and structures (Guthrie et al., 2011; Makhecha et al., 2018). Besides, HR department made a partnership

with middle managers to involve them in determining strategic change (Currie & Procter, 2001) and made decisions, in consultation with line managers, on major HRM policies when integrating HRM and business strategy (Dany et al., 2008) which is in line with informing, engaging and empowering multi-level managers (Stanton et al., 2010). Ultimately, HR department implemented (delivered) HR practices (Friede et al., 2008; Makhecha et al., 2018; Ng & Sears, 2020), for example, by forming a centralised internal HR shared services centre (Cooke, 2006).

Contexts

Our review identified the necessary factors for HR department involvement in HRM implementation. These factors can be categorised into three levels: individual, leader, and organisational pre-conditions.

At the individual level, HR executives should have high competencies, high motivation, and relational coordination, and avoid using their instrumental motives (Makhecha et al., 2018).

At the leader level, senior managers should have positive beliefs about HR practice, high moral values, and should engage in HR practice-related behaviours (Ng & Sears, 2020).

At the organisational level, organisation should provide necessary resources (Woodhams & Lupton, 2006) and should be characterised by centralised decision-making, strong governance mechanisms, and as an environment where the legislation is respected (Woodhams & Lupton, 2006) with less local competition and high organisational support (Makhecha et al., 2018). Additionally, HR department should undertake the role of change agent (Kim & Ryu, 2011). It should clarify the design of the HRM implementation in advance, and create positive workgroup relationships (Friede et al., 2008). It also should provide high formalisation of HR practices (Makhecha et al., 2018) with HR strategies that

have broad themes rather than tight prescriptions (Currie & Procter, 2001), clear communications (Makhecha et al., 2018), and significant investment in middle managers development (Currie & Procter, 2001). Respectively, middle managers should have autonomy to cross functional boundaries within the organisation to champion for HR department (Currie & Procter, 2001). Finally, employees should be aware of their rights (specific to gender-based equal opportunity practices) (Woodhams & Lupton, 2006) and have certain characteristics (e.g., self-regulatory work habits for reduced-load work) (Friede et al., 2008).

Outcomes

Our review revealed that HR department involvement contributed to various proximal, intermediate, and distal outcomes.

As proximal outcomes, HR department involvement influenced managers perception of their HR department to have higher strategic value (Guthrie et al., 2011).

As intermediate outcomes, HR department involvement contributed to employees' acceptance of HR practices (Stirpe et al., 2013), HR effectiveness –the extent to which HR contributes to enhancing the firms' competitive advantage by appropriately supporting line managers and employees– (Kim & Ryu, 2011), and strength of HR system (Stanton et al., 2010).

As distal outcomes, HR department involvement influenced the positive relationship between HRM integration and organisational performance (Dany et al., 2008), and enhanced human and social capital of the firm's workforce (Guthrie et al., 2011).

In contrast, HR department involvement had some negative outcomes. For instance, the delivery of the HR function through a centralised internal HR shared services centre had negative impacts on employees (e.g., loss of face-to-face contact with the HR staff, lack of

employee representation, lack of clarity of ownership of HR problems, negative perception of HR shared services centre), line managers (e.g., work intensity, waste of resources, and reduced staff morale), and HR staff (e.g., weak relationships with clients) (Cooke, 2006).

Figure 5 shows the CMO configuration based on HR department involvement.

Insert Figure 5 about here

DISCUSSION

While studies on HRM implementation have increased in recent years and more attention has been paid to it by dedicating a special issue to the topic (i.e., Bondarouk et al., 2018), systematic literature reviews are still scarce (Trullen et al., 2020), and especially cause-consequence reviews were missing (Mirfakhar et al., 2018). Thus, this study contributes to the literature by systematically reviewing papers in the field and providing such cause-consequence relationships in the form of Context-Mechanism-Outcome using Realist Synthesis (Pawson et al., 2005).

Since multiple actors are involved in HRM implementation, the CMO configurations were presented for each actor. Line managers are considered as the main implementers of HR practices (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013) and past reviews had also shown that most studies on HRM implementation have focused on line managers (Mirfakhar et al., 2018). Consequently, in this study more CMOs were found on line managers. While senior managers can have large influence on HRM implementation (Mirfakhar et al., 2021; Ng & Sears, 2020), very few studies have focused on the mechanisms through which they influence on HRM implementation. This is also the case for other actors such as HR departments and employees.

In this realist synthesis, mechanisms of actors' involvement were categorised into actors' perceptions and behaviours. This is in line with sense-making and sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) as actors try to make sense of the what, why, and how of change - introduced HR practice- and also shape others' interpretations of it through their behaviours.

While actor's perceptions and behaviours can be seen as mechanisms, our realist synthesis shows that through the process of sense-giving actors' perceptions and behaviours can also be considered as context to other actors' mechanisms. For instance, while CEO's high HR belief is shown as a mechanism influencing HRM implementation positively (Mirfakhar et al., 2021), CEO's high HR belief is also found as a context which positively influences HR manager's perception of their CEO commitment which consequently enhances HRM implementation (Ng & Sears, 2020). Therefore, actors influence one another (i.e., one's perception and behaviour act as the context for the perception and behaviour -mechanism- of the other actor) and consequently impact HRM implementation. These findings complements the dynamic nature of HRM implementation introduced by van Mierlo et al. (2018) where they consider HRM implementation as a continuous process in which HRM practices and actors' behaviour recursively and continuously influence one another. Here, we argue that not only the actors' behaviours influence the HR practices and their implementation, but also actors influence one another recursively and continuously. In other words, there are smaller recursive cycles of actors influencing one another within the larger recursive cycles of influences of actors on HR practices.

Contexts were categorised into different levels, relating to individuals, supervisors, organisation and even the external environment of the organisation, albeit the organisational level were the more frequent one. Overall, organisational culture and support, how HR messages are communicated and other contextual factors which were related to HRM system

strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) were among the most frequently mentioned contextual factors. As mentioned, contextual factors which were at organisational level were among the most recurrent ones for most actors, except for senior managers for whom most contextual factors were at individual level. This is in line with the common belief that senior management's support is one of the success factors of HRM implementation (Guest & Bos-Nehles, 2013).

Outcomes were grouped based on a spectrum ranging from proximal to distal. These outcomes ranged from change in perceptions of various actors, and their acceptance, to more distal ones resulting in enhanced employee performance, reduced employee turnover intentions, and increased organisational performance. The extracted outcomes, put together, depict a clearer picture of how HRM is related to firm performance hence unlocking the HRM black box (Boselie, Dietz, and Boon, 2005; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Paauwe and Boselie, 2005; Paauwe and Richardson, 1997).

Practical implications

Following W-H question framework (Dello Russo et al., 2021), this study provides multiple practical implications. The context-mechanism-outcome configurations provided in this study can help organisations, and more specifically HR departments, to plan their HRM implementations better, ensure its effectiveness, and consequently reduce the intended-implemented gap. Since HRM implementation is a multi-actor process (Mirfakhar et al., 2018), the CMO configurations which are provided for each actor can be taken into consideration by HR professionals and can be used as guidelines to ensure every actor, considering their contextual factors (context), is on board perception-wise and ready to play their role behaviour-wise (mechanisms) to implement the HR practice effectively (outcomes). These CMO configurations, provide HR practitioners with a list to ensure all success factors

are in place and to detect the ones missing and plan accordingly prior to the implementation to increase their success rate.

Limitations and future research

Our study is not without limitations. While we have tried to be thorough in using multiple databases and selecting the articles, there might be papers that are not included due to our chosen Boolean combination. Moreover, we might have also incurred in a threat to generalisability, as some papers have studied specific practices and we have generalised their findings to all HR practices. Furthermore, the contexts, mechanisms and outcomes related to each actor are presented together while each context might be related to specific mechanism as these are extracted from various studies. Additionally, different contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes are measured, tested, or hypothesised in different contexts, with different measures and samples (including single case studies) and in different relations for answering different research questions which adds to the threat of generalisability.

For future research, most studies have focused on line managers, we suggest future studies to focus on other actors. In addition, since these actors interact with one another in the context of HRM implementation and influence one another by their perceptions and behaviours through the processes of sense-making and sense-giving, studying these actors in a system and using network analysis would shed further light on how HRM implementation effectiveness can be achieved.

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Figure 1: the search process in a flow diagram

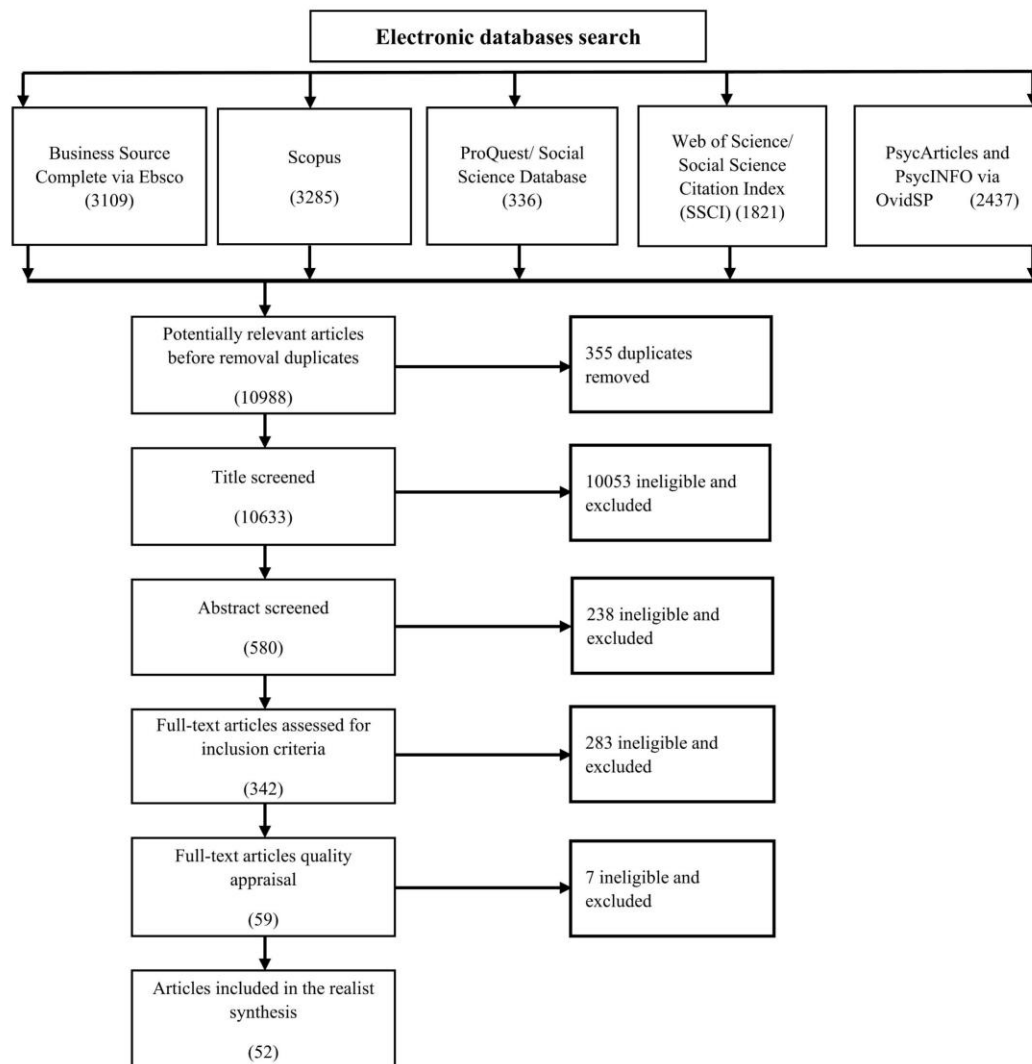


Figure 2. The CMO configuration based on line managers' involvement.

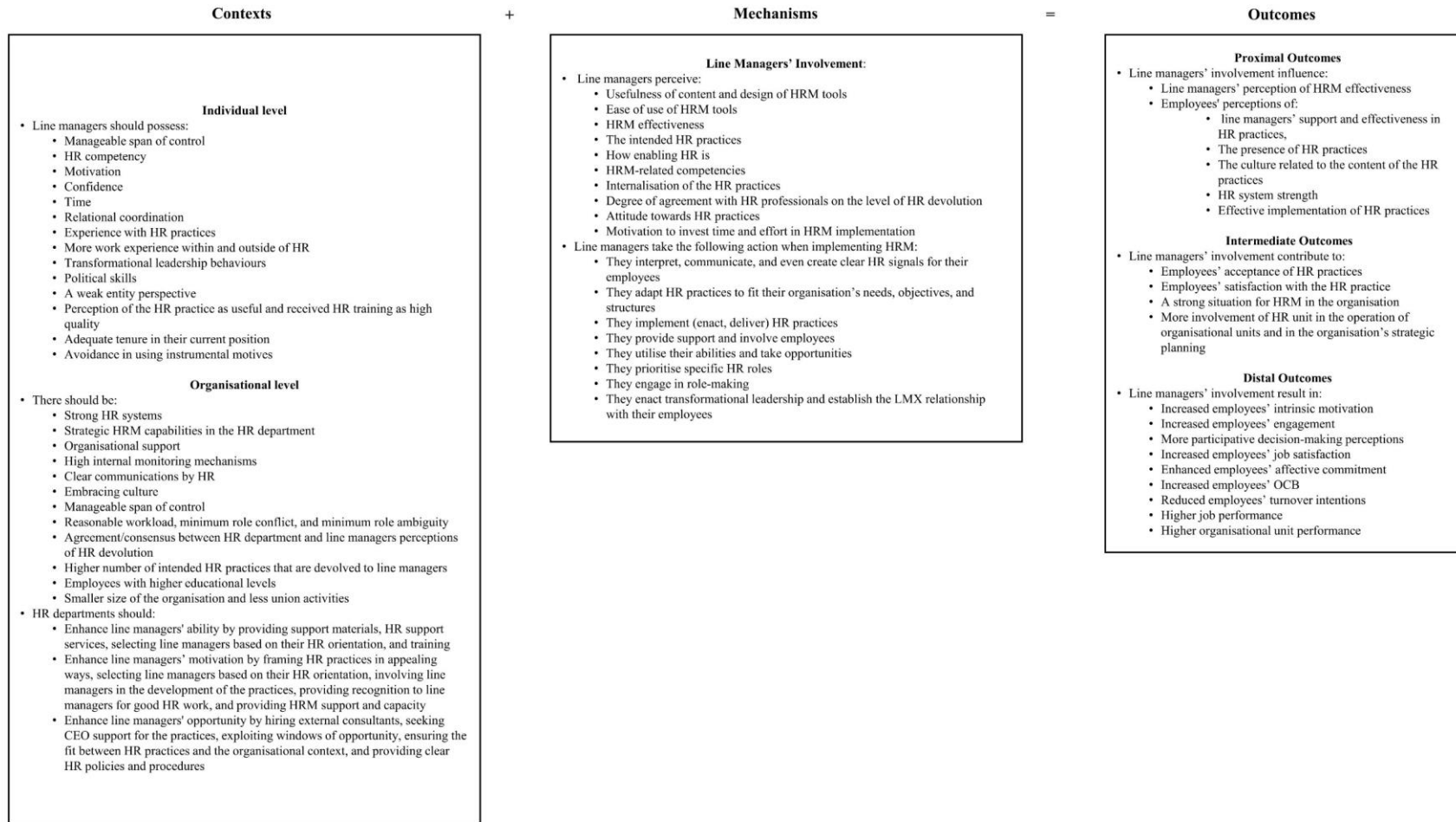


Figure 3. The CMO configuration based on employees' involvement.

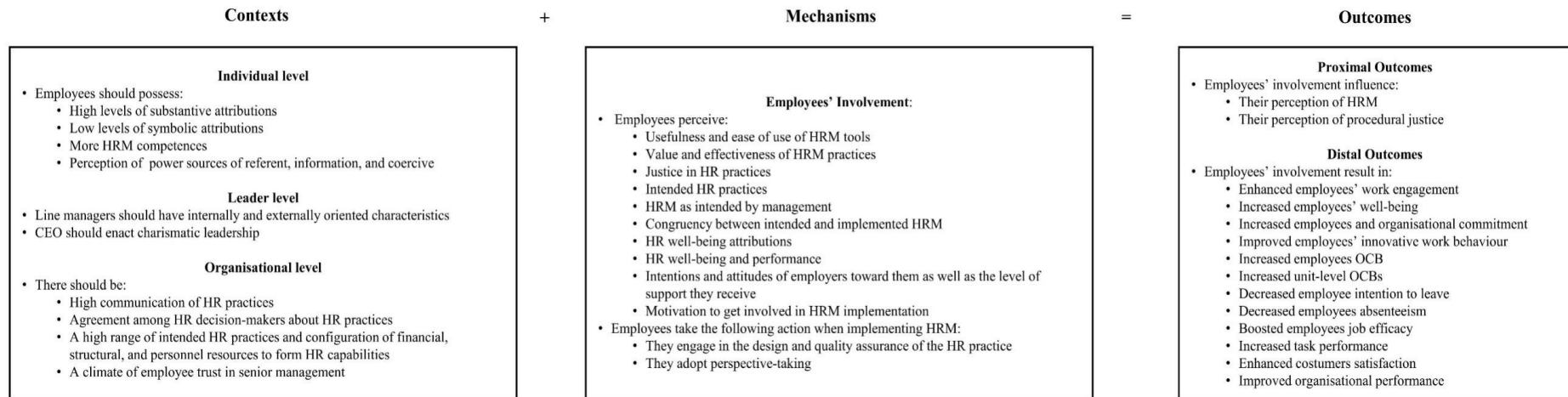


Figure 4. The CMO configuration based on senior managers' involvement.

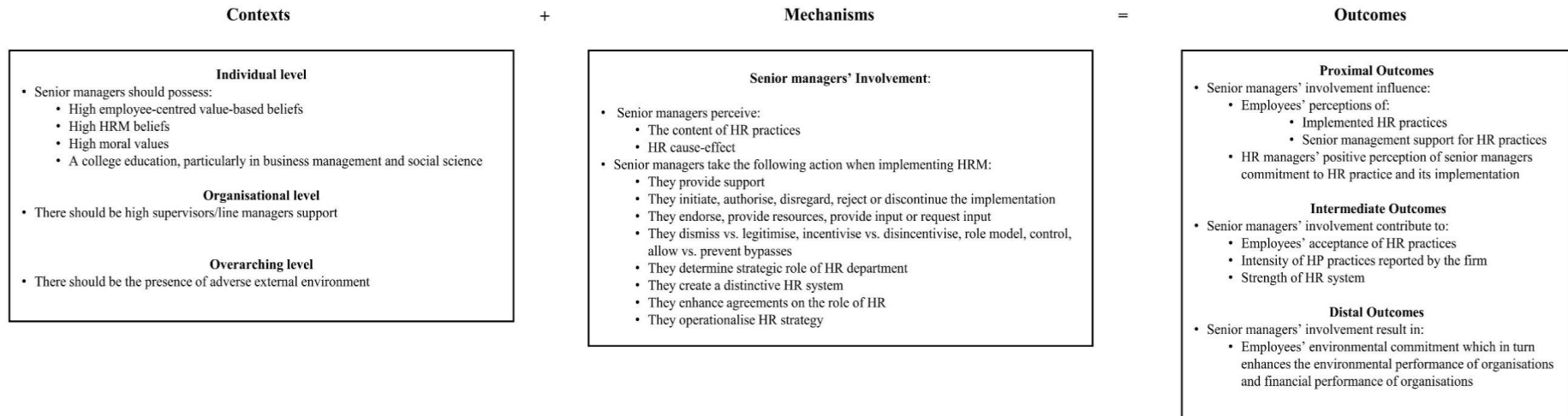


Figure 5. The CMO configuration based on HR department involvement.

