Attracting cross- and inter-disciplinary research

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Editorial: Attracting Cross- and Inter-Disciplinary Research

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With this issue the journal enters its second year. In our opening article for the journal we argued that in order to address and understand the challenges of people and performance, we need to move academic discussion away from, and beyond, its traditional specialist and functional boundaries. In our opening article (Sparrow & Cooper, 2014) we argued that both researchers and practitioners need to adopt a broad definition of performance, and examine how the achievement of important strategic outcomes, such as innovation, customer centricity, operational excellence, globalization, and partnered delivery of people management across organization, both surface and become dependent on complex people and organization issues. Hence the need to think about these issues in terms of broader questions of organizational effectiveness. We suggested too that we should see more research that focuses on the intermediate performance outcomes that are necessary to achieve these strategic outcomes, and to examine these performance issues across several levels of analysis such as the individual, team, function, organization and societal (policy) level.

At our first Editorial Board we discussed the mission of the journal. We are grateful to a number of our Senior Advisory Board whose reflections and insights have helped shape this Editorial. We are aware that authors might make an implicit assumption that the subtitle to the journal of “People and Performance” might suggest that we wish to maintain a narrow HR-focus to the journal. As a potential author from other management sub-fields, the reference to HR might seem a bit odd. We feel it is important that authors do not associate the use of "people" in the journal name just with "HR". Authors are therefore encouraged, where appropriate, to tap disciplines beyond those typically associated with achieving organization effectiveness through people (such as HRM, OB and other social disciplines). Whilst we would expect to see major contributions from these fields, we especially welcome research that connects the challenge of managing the organizational workplace with topics such as consumer behaviour, operations, risk and crisis management, political economy, population ecology, industrial sociology, amongst others.

Academic disciplines, as branches of taught knowledge or learning, serve the purpose of organizing knowledge about an issue, and defining the accepted wisdom, evidence and theory that must guide debate. Some disciplines may be considered to be well-established, in that the field of study will be found in most universities and there is consensus around the core journals and conferences that will manage the discourse. Other disciplines are young and evolving, slowly being forged out of new areas of practice or institutional arrangements.

Some might view the subfields within management as being different disciplines. Other might relate to management as one discipline, and view inter-disciplinary efforts as those that cut across other business disciplines (management, marketing, accounting) and/or fields outside of business (such as sociology).

Inevitably we need to debate the most appropriate balance between deep specialization and analysis through irreducible and well-tested principles, versus premature closure of understanding, or a failure to see close connections between ideas, by reference to artificial academic boundaries. This tension will be inevitable, made all the more obvious by the technologies of our day.
First, given various search engines and e-journals databases, it becomes much easier than has hitherto been the case to access and broker journal papers from very different communities, in order to enrich and validate one’s perspective. This can be a great strength, but as we all know, equally carries risks as ideas, models and theories become incompletely or inaccurately moved across disciplines.

Second, and perhaps as a consequence of the first trend, we witness ideas from a range of disciplines now being made more visible, and introduced into practice. Let us provide some examples of current challenges faced by organizations that are perhaps best seen, understood, or managed by looking across either different academic disciplines, or at a practice-level, from across traditional functions.

Consider what many would see as the limited progress made by organizations towards what would be seen as an authentic approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Many organizations have begun to recognize the limitations of their existing strategies, and many academics might consider routing their research on this topic into very different academic journals. Significant investment has been made into CSR from the fields of marketing, branding, product development, supply chain, culture, human resource management, and employer branding. Yet, when one looks at existing practice, the strategies in practice still often end up appearing incoherent, activities remain narrow and do not appear to be integrated across functions, and therefore the investments that are made end up being inefficient. Aware that their marketing spend on CSR might have just produced a form of public relations that few people see as authentic, practitioners are beginning to see the need for more radical surgery, for example re-directing investments away from marketing towards product development in order to provide technical solutions to the reputation challenge, rather than managing the impact the reputation perception. What they are doing, in effect, is shifting resources (and for us, the intellectual attention) across different fields, disciplines and functions, and forging new and important horizontal and non-functional activities. The question we might ask is, has our research kept pace with, or even forged the future direction for, such developments of practice? This journal then, whilst needing papers that are focused around the people and organizational challenges that are associated with CSR, would encourage such research to be cognisant of the necessary analytical frameworks that help guide the marketing, branding, product development, supply chain, culture, or human resource management dimensions.

Similarly, to solve the people and organization challenges associated with productivity, at the level of practice we need to see coordinated investments at national and institutional level, coupled with changes inside organizations that combine technology, space and design, knowledge and people management in new ways. Academic study of innovation draws upon ideas from technology management, R&D, economics and organization behaviour. The management of innovation requires joined-up thinking, and a combination of ideas from strategy, business model change, organization design and work psychology. Studies of lean management at their heart combine traditions that can be linked back to operations management or organization behaviour. Ideas about customer centricity cross the disciplines of marketing, consumer behaviour, organization design and IT. Studies of the challenges to organizational effectiveness faced in a range of collaborative settings, seem to have core and common questions about people management that concern risk, governance and capability. Researchers who are examining the organizational effectiveness of settings as varied as collaborative business models, outsourcing
arrangements, joint ventures, strategic alliances, joint R&D, collaborative manufacturing, supply chain, public-private partnerships, social partnerships, multi-employer networks, or multi-organization project and response operations seem to be seeking common ground. Redefining their research under the label of inter-organizational studies, when they focus on the people management challenges faced they now broker in ideas from the fields of organizational behaviour, operations management, strategic management, and marketing.

We see a similar move towards more inter-disciplinary analysis when researchers focus on important practices. For example, debate around the topic of strategic talent management is now taking shape within a much broader and inter-disciplinary basis. HRM researchers are co-opting ideas from across a number of other management disciplines. They have borrowed ideas about resource portfolios and organizational capabilities from the field of strategy (which in turn invokes ideas about the management of strategic resources and organizational learning). They talk about talent pipelines and supply chain risks, which brings in ideas from the field of operations management. They talk about value propositions, and brands that can be used to shape the employment experience, and market mapping – all ideas that originally come from the field of marketing. The work of economic geographers, previously little mentioned in the International HRM literature, is bringing to bear a number of important strategic considerations that have a bearing on questions about centralization and decentralization in talent management. These researchers, previously never cited by HRM researchers, have an understanding of how organizations deal with the mapping of geographical resources and have insights into the spatial distribution of such resources, and how global resources may be exploited and developed. Arguably, then, a novel area of people management practice, might lead to the development of a bridge field, developing its own language. As with any emerging field, it will take time for the best methodologies and models to emerge, and for researchers to learn what works, and what does not.

In all these instances, whilst we need articles that focus on the central people management issues that must be better understood, we would encourage such study to forge connections between the relevant literatures.

In making such a call, we are well aware of the institutional pressures that surround academic publishing, and the forces at play that, depending on your perspective, might focus resource and academic quality, or perversely limit more innovative thinking. There is an inevitable narrow line between success and failure for any new journal. There are also of course different ways of thinking about the nature and usefulness of research, captured in the debate about the differences between cross-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary study.

This Editorial provides some additional guidance to authors on how to think about this challenge, and frame their articles accordingly.

Cross-disciplinary research tends to explain one aspect or discipline (in the case of this journal problems of people and performance) through the use or application of another discipline. At its simplest, it crosses boundaries between two or more disciplines, using concepts or methods core to or developed in one discipline and applying them to another. So, for example, researchers might choose to look at the problem of employer branding by bringing models and frameworks from the field of marketing and the generic study of brands to bear. The argument would be that those researchers interested in people and organizational issues might learn from and
sharpen their own research by the export of one set of disciplinary knowledge to another. The cross disciplinary dimension to the study might be relatively narrowly defined – for example an article in this issue seeks to forge common ground between work engagement and HRM researchers – or might be more radical in its attempt at bridging – for example our previous Special Issue on Crisis and Organizational Efficiency at its heart sought to build connections between risk management and HRM.

Such studies are useful and are welcomed by the journal. But we also seek more fundamental inter-disciplinary research efforts of either a conceptual or empirical nature.

Inter-disciplinary (or multi-disciplinary) research moves a little beyond the export and re-application of one frame of analysis to another field. Whilst there are important transfers of concepts, frameworks, theories, and methods from one discipline to another, rather than assuming that one discipline might have superior ideas about a phenomenon (and therefore only its ideas should be exported to another field to ensure better interpretation) it assumes more equality between the stakeholders. Although common and equivalent ideas might appear in the separate disciplines, there is a need for shared and extended knowledge in each discipline involved, and this extension to both disciplines is necessary to result in potentially more innovative understanding and solutions. So for example studies on collaborative and partnering arrangements between organizations have been conducted across the social sciences management literature by general business researchers, but often such research neglects the challenges that such arrangements create for managing the workforce. An argument might be made that those interested in the problems of effective inter-organizational management need to draw upon a broad range of research and incorporate insights from diverse fields, which might include human resource management as well as supply chain management, cross sector social partnerships, and private sector partnering with voluntary sector organizations.

Finally, trans-disciplinary research is that which brings together all relevant inter-disciplinary efforts and attempts to relate all of these into a more coherent whole, as a result of which a new, less definable or traditional, understanding emerges.

To conclude, we invite research that crosses disciplinary boundaries in an effort to improve our understanding people-related management issues associated with achieving organizational effectiveness in the public and private sector. For articles that seek to adopt a cross-, inter- or trans-disciplinary approach, we would encourage authors to signal the ways in which they believe such study should be defined. We should not put up too many hurdles for authors, because we understand the risks and challenges in undertaking such research, and getting it past reviewers. But there are some useful ways in which authors might articulate the approach they have taken, and the specific contribution that they seek to achieve. For example, we think a useful discipline for both authors and reviewers is to consider how best to:

- signal why it is believed that there might be a lack of coherence, or some incomplete understanding of an issue, as a result of too narrow a disciplinary focus
- argue the importance of, and demonstrate the subsequent benefits of, creating a more holistic interpretation, e.g. how approaches might be modified to better address problems at hand, or draw connections between previously
unlinked work in order to disclose points of intersection

- signal the unrecognized complexity that results from looking across disciplines, e.g. articulate the problems and limitations of staying within accepted paradigms within any one of the linked disciplines
- demonstrate how connecting different academic or professional schools of thought results in a more valuable contribution, or forms part of a cumulative growth of knowledge and consensus
- explain how the language, concepts, theory and research methods of each chosen discipline may be co-opted for a new and more innovative purpose
- build bridges between disciplines, forging points of common understanding and informing respective disciplines of the knowledge that can be applied to new settings
- provide clear synthesis, giving effective guidance on how conflicts in understanding might be resolved or more coherence arrived at as a result of the ideas being brought together.

Reference