



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.

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3 First, given various search engines and e-journals databases, it becomes much easier
4 than has hitherto been the case to access and broker journal papers from very different
5 communities, in order to enrich and validate one's perspective. This can be a great
6 strength, but as we all know, equally carries risks as ideas, models and theories
7 become incompletely or inaccurately moved across disciplines.
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9 Second, and perhaps as a consequence of the first trend, we witness ideas from a
10 range of disciplines now being made more visible, and introduced into practice. Let
11 us provide some examples of current challenges faced by organizations that are
12 perhaps best seen, understood, or managed by looking across either different
13 academic disciplines, or at a practice-level, from across traditional functions.
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15 Consider what many would see as the limited progress made by organizations towards
16 what would be seen as an authentic approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR).
17 Many organizations have begun to recognize the limitations of their existing strategies,
18 and many academics might consider routing their research on this topic into very
19 different academic journals. Significant investment has been made into CSR from the
20 fields of marketing, branding, product development, supply chain, culture, human
21 resource management, and employer branding. Yet, when one looks at existing
22 practice, the strategies in practice still often end up appearing incoherent, activities
23 remain narrow and do not appear to be integrated across functions, and therefore the
24 investments that are made end up being inefficient. Aware that their marketing spend
25 on CSR might have just produced a form of public relations that few people see as
26 authentic, practitioners are beginning to see the need for more radical surgery, for
27 example re-directing investments away from marketing towards product development
28 in order to provide technical solutions to the reputation challenge, rather than
29 managing the impact the reputation perception. What they are doing, in effect, is
30 shifting resources (and for us, the intellectual attention) across different fields,
31 disciplines and functions, and forging new and important horizontal and non-
32 functional activities. The question we might ask is, has our research kept pace with,
33 or even forged the future direction for, such developments of practice? This journal
34 then, whilst needing papers that are focused around the people and organizational
35 challenges that are associated with CSR, would encourage such research to be
36 cognisant of the necessary analytical frameworks that help guide the marketing,
37 branding, product development, supply chain, culture, or human resource
38 management dimensions.
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42 Similarly, to solve the people and organization challenges associated with
43 productivity, at the level of practice we need to see coordinated investments at
44 national and institutional level, coupled with changes inside organizations that
45 combine technology, space and design, knowledge and people management in new
46 ways. Academic study of innovation draws upon ideas from technology management,
47 R&D, economics and organization behaviour. The management of innovation
48 requires joined-up thinking, and a combination of ideas from strategy, business model
49 change, organization design and work psychology. Studies of lean management at
50 their heart combine traditions that can be linked back to operations management or
51 organization behaviour. Ideas about customer centricity cross the disciplines of
52 marketing, consumer behaviour, organization design and IT. Studies of the
53 challenges to organizational effectiveness faced in a range of collaborative settings,
54 seem to have core and common questions about people management that concern risk,
55 governance and capability. Researchers who are examining the organizational
56 effectiveness of settings as varied as collaborative business models, outsourcing
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3 arrangements, joint ventures, strategic alliances, joint R&D, collaborative
4 manufacturing, supply chain, public-private partnerships, social partnerships, multi-
5 employer networks, or multi-organization project and response operations seem to be
6 seeking common ground. Redefining their research under the label of inter-
7 organizational studies, when they focus on the people management challenges faced
8 they now broker in ideas from the fields of organizational behaviour, operations
9 management, strategic management, and marketing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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5 • signal the unrecognized complexity that results from looking across
6 disciplines, e.g. articulate the problems and limitations of staying within
7 accepted paradigms within any one of the linked disciplines
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9 • demonstrate how connecting different academic or professional schools of
10 thought results in a more valuable contribution, or forms part of a cumulative
11 growth of knowledge and consensus
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13 • explain how the language, concepts, theory and research methods of each
14 chosen discipline may be co-opted for a new and more innovative purpose
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16 • build bridges between disciplines, forging points of common understanding
17 and informing respective disciplines of the knowledge that can be applied to
18 new settings
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20 • provide clear synthesis, giving effective guidance on how conflicts in
21 understanding might be resolved or more coherence arrived at as a result of
22 the ideas being brought together.
23

24 **Reference**

25
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