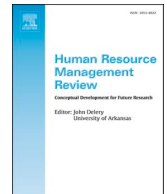




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/hrmr

Back to basics in human resource theorizing: A call for greater attention to jobs

Samantha A. Conroy^{a,*}, John W. Morton^b^a Management, 223 Rockwell Hall, 1201 Campus Delivery, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, United States of America^b Management and Human Resources, College of Business Administration, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, Pomona, CA 91768, United States of America

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Human resource management
Jobs
Pay level
Human resource strategy
Job category
Job level
HR architecture

ABSTRACT

Job categories and levels are a central part of human resource management, yet research often treats jobs as “noise” rather than fundamental to theory. We review the ways in which jobs connect to human resource strategy, as well as the role of jobs in influencing the outcomes of human resource strategy. Future researchers are encouraged to take job categories and levels into account as they develop theory and design studies in the field of human resource management.

Human Resource Management Review (HRMR) is a top outlet for conceptual/theory development focused on Human Resource (HR) issues. The journal provides a launching pad for the direction of empirical work across a variety of outlets and then provides a landing pad for integrating and resetting when empirical work begins to proliferate. Therefore, the types of papers published in *HRMR* have high potential to influence the overall direction of the human resource management (HRM) research field.

As an Associate Editor (Conroy) for *HRMR*, I have the opportunity to see up-and-coming HR research, what scholars are focusing their efforts on, and how those efforts result in the focus of other scholars over time. The intention of this editorial is to encourage theory development to include greater contextualization for the field of HRM. While there are many ways we can better contextualize our research (e.g., considering firm size, employee characteristics, cultural values), I and my colleague (Morton) hope to encourage more work that incorporates job categories and job level into theory.

Notably, per the aims and scope of *HRMR*, the journal “does not consider papers that deal with a single occupation, company, industry or country, nor cases of these entities (a single company, industry, etc. can be used as the primary example, but should not be the only example and the insights of the paper must be generalizable beyond that primary example).” Thus, we are not suggesting that research submissions focus on one job alone. We recognize the impact potential of theories with breadth, and why this is particularly important in the field of HRM where our concerns are broader than a single job – rather we hope to encourage research that incorporates HRM for a specific set of job categories and/or job levels.

When we discuss job categories and job levels, we recognize there may be varying definitions. Job descriptions and specifications are fundamental to all areas of human resource management; almost any HRM textbook includes an early chapter about jobs, job analysis, and workflow (e.g., DeCenzo, Robbins, & Verhulst, 2016; Lussier & Hendon, 2017; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2020). The scope of a job may be narrow (i.e., the job of lead cashier) or broad (i.e., the job category of customer service). Level of job

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Samantha.conroy@colostate.edu (S.A. Conroy), jwmorton@cpp.edu (J.W. Morton).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2023.100973>

Received 12 May 2023; Accepted 27 May 2023

1053-4822/© 2023 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

refers to the place a job has in the organizational hierarchy (e.g., how high or low a job is in the organizational spectrum of value, as is often demonstrated through grading systems and/or pay rates, Gupta, Conroy, & Delery, 2012). Our brief review of *HRMR* papers indicates that a small number of papers do have an orientation toward job category and/or level (e.g., Bowen, 2016; Rogers, Miller, Flinchbaugh, Giddarie, & Barker, 2021; Schroeder, Bricka, & Whitaker, 2021). Here, we outline why *HRMR* as the premier theory journal in HRM would benefit from more attention to job categories and job levels.

1. Job categories and job levels are central to human resource management practice selection and implementation

Some of the most fundamental theories in HRM address the importance of jobs (e.g., Delery & Shaw, 2001; Lepak & Snell, 1999; Osterman, 1987). For example, Osterman (1987) included job classification and job definition in an analysis of different employment modes within a firm. Lepak and Snell (1999) built out the HR architecture, arguing that employment modes are driven by strategic factors (i.e., value and uniqueness) based on job requirements. Delery and Shaw (2001) further developed the idea of core and non-core jobs and their association with different management forms. Empirical studies following these theoretical developments demonstrate support that “specific HRM practices were strategically designed to be different for various employee groups” (Luo et al., 2021, p. 251).

Given the centrality of these theories to our field, the importance of HR practices to HR research, and the value of central construct etiology in theory development, we would expect the variety of job categories in organizations to play a key role in most HR theory. The aforementioned paper by Luo et al. (2021) provides a review of HR architecture papers, and reports that papers overwhelmingly address the same quadrant, the high value and high uniqueness quadrant. We suspect that if workers in different job categories are getting substantially different treatment from an HR perspective, it is not a sufficient organization-level story to focus on only one quadrant. The counterargument could be the strategic relevance of the high value/high uniqueness quadrant, but it seems narrow to assume the interactions across quadrants are not strategically relevant, at the very least.

An area of research that seems to be giving added attention recently to differences in the practices of firms across different job levels is the area of work-life. In particular, Kossek and Lautsch published a paper on work-life flexibility across job levels (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). They defined levels based on income, skill, and occupation. The findings of the paper include differences in work-life related HR practices for those at different levels. Lower-level workers have more difficulty getting accommodations to work from home or different hours, while upper-level workers have more schedule and location flexibility. While their findings were based on an integrative review across research publications, many of these differences seem likely to occur within organizations given theories like the HR Architecture. In fact, Lepak and Snell (1999) suggested that “lower-level jobs, such as clerical, support and maintenance positions” were likely to be viewed strategically as low value and low uniqueness,¹ and strategies for workers in these jobs were likely to focus on the job only (rather than development and mobility) with a high emphasis on procedures and results. There is also anecdotal evidence of organizations treating part-time, seasonal, and front-line workers differently than mid-level workers (Shipler, 2005).

2. Job categories and job levels often matter in the outcomes of human resource management practices

Not only do we know that job categories and levels drive HR practice design, we also have growing evidence that worker job categories or levels are likely to be relevant to micro and macro outcomes of these practices. For example, Leana and Meuris (Leana & Meuris, 2015; Meuris & Leana, 2018) have described both the organizational and individual costs of workers living in states of financial precarity. Most commonly, these are workers in lower job levels, who are often negatively impacted by their financial precarity, which is likely to lead to a different response to HR practices than workers in higher job categories/levels. While discussions of claimants in the stakeholder literatures have often focused on “employees” as an overall group, there is clear evidence that workers in lower-level jobs have different employment experiences than workers in higher-level jobs (e.g., those in management and professional jobs) (Bapuji, Husted, Lu, & Mir, 2018; Maxwell, 2006), and this would likely manifest in differential outcomes of HR practices as a function of job category/level.

Based on the research from Leana and Meuris (2015, 2018), we can see that workers across levels often have different environments outside of work, which tie into this prediction of different outcomes. Looking to the social class literature, individuals categorized in lower social classes often live in environments that are characterized by instability, danger, and uncertainty. For example, lower class neighborhoods are often prone to increased violence and crowding, residential instability, and higher levels of pollution (Durden, Hill, & Angel, 2007; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Additionally, many lower-level jobs are characterized by instability, which can manifest in unreliable work schedules and little choice in which days or times an employee works (Henly & Lambert, 2014). These types of HR practices could exacerbate the unstable nature of workers' personal lives. Furthermore, such workers might be more susceptible to the negative effects of economic scarcity, i.e., “the perception that one has fewer financial resources than one's needs require” (Meuris & Leana, 2015, p. 143). Economic scarcity can have profound psychological consequences, both cognitive and emotional, on workers and can also diminish individual performance at work. To the extent that workers at lower levels have lower pay than workers at higher levels, which is typically the case, they would be more likely to experience economic scarcity and its negative effects. They would also be more likely to lack a financial safety net than workers at higher levels.

Because of this unique environment and state of financial precarity, workers in lower-level jobs might respond differently to HR

¹ Notably, Lepak and Snell (1999) recognize value and uniqueness to be firm specific. So, while there is an indication that these types of jobs are low value and uniqueness, there could be some organizations where they fall in a different quadrant.

practices than workers at higher levels. For example, Kossek and Lautsch (2018) raise the issue of differences in the outcomes of HR practices across workers throughout their paper. They note findings that workers in lower-level positions may not be able to afford to use unpaid leave. Other work has shown that changes in maternity leave policies from unpaid to paid time off has the largest effects for children of mothers who were unable or unlikely to take unpaid leave (Carneiro, Løken, & Salvanes, 2015). Essentially, for the HR practice of parental leave, policy changes that are uniform across job levels or categories still have different effects.

There has been a recent interest in pay volatility among scholars (Conroy, Roumpi, Delery, & Gupta, 2022; Sayre, 2022). Both projects in this area point to the role of pay level or job in the effects of HR issues. For example, Conroy et al. (2022) reported an interaction of pay level and volatility on turnover with higher paid employees appearing to be less affected by volatility. Sayre (2022) approaches pay volatility from several angles, including three different studies with one focused on tipped workers, one on gig workers, and one on finance, marketing, and sales workers. While his findings were consistent in some areas, some negative health indirect effects did not show up for the corporate sample that did show up for tipped and gig samples, suggesting the value he was able to add by including varying job types. All in all, this research points to the importance of incorporating elements of job category and level into one's theorizing.

Finally, at a macro level, it would be beneficial to incorporate job categories and levels into theorizing given their association with inequality. Inequality has been a growing area of interest in management (Bapuji, Ertug, & Shaw, 2020). HR research, in particular, belongs in the inequality conversation given the importance of employment practice differences in driving inequality. Employment practices for all jobs have shifted substantially in the last few decades from internally-focused practices between employees and firms to more market-focused practices (Bidwell, Briscoe, Fernandez-Mateo, & Sterling, 2013). These shifts have driven inequality to new levels. As Bidwell et al. (2013) notes, "less-privileged workers" have been the most affected by changes in the employment relationship. Thus, if we want to understand HR practices and inequality, it is necessary to keep the types of work and associated HR practices in mind.

3. Conclusion

Academics, including ourselves, often include job category and pay level as control variables in empirical studies. Yet, jobs represent so much more than "noise" in the field of HRM, as evidenced by the emphasis on jobs in key HRM papers and textbooks. Jobs matter both in the design and outcomes of HR practices and policies. Our call is for researchers to consider a shift from viewing job category and level as "noise" to viewing the nature of jobs as fundamental to how and why HRM policies and practices influence employee and organizational outcomes. Many of us teach in our classes that understanding the specific jobs in an organization is critical to HR; perhaps, we should do the same in our research.

References

- Bapuji, H., Ertug, G., & Shaw, J. D. (2020). Organizations and societal economic inequality: a review and way forward. *Acad. Manag. Ann.*, 14(1), 60–91. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2018.0029>
- Bapuji, H., Husted, B. W., Lu, J., & Mir, R. (2018). Value creation, appropriation, and distribution: How firms contribute to societal economic inequality. *Bus. Soc.*, 57(6), 983–1009. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318758390>
- Bidwell, M., Briscoe, F., Fernandez-Mateo, I., & Sterling, A. (2013). The employment relationship and inequality: How and why changes in employment practices are reshaping rewards in organizations. *Acad. Manag. Ann.*, 7(1), 61–121. <https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2013.761403>
- Bowen, D. E. (2016). The changing role of employees in service theory and practice: an interdisciplinary view. *Hum. Resour. Manag. Rev.*, 26(1), 4–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2015.09.002>
- Carneiro, P., Løken, K. V., & Salvanes, K. G. (2015). A flying start? Maternity leave benefits and long-run outcomes of children. *J. Polit. Econ.*, 123(2), 365–412. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679627>
- Conroy, S. A., Roumpi, D., Delery, J. E., & Gupta, N. (2022). Pay volatility and employee turnover in the trucking industry. *J. Manag.*, 48(3), 605–629. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211019651>
- DeCenzo, D. A., Robbins, S. P., & Verhulst, S. L. (2016). *Fundamentals of human resource management*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Delery, J. E., & Shaw, J. D. (2001). The strategic management of people in work organizations: Review, synthesis, and extension. In *Vol. 20. Research in personnel and human resources management* (pp. 165–197). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301\(01\)20003-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301(01)20003-6)
- Durden, E. D., Hill, T. D., & Angel, R. J. (2007). Social demands, social supports, and psychological distress among low-income women. *J. Soc. Pers. Relat.*, 24(3), 343–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407507077226>
- Gupta, N., Conroy, S. A., & Delery, J. E. (2012). The many faces of pay variation. *Hum. Resour. Manag. Rev.*, 22(2), 100–115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2011.12.001>
- Henly, J. R., & Lambert, S. J. (2014). Unpredictable work timing in retail jobs: implications for employee work–life conflict. *ILR Rev.*, 67(3), 986–1016. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793914537458>
- Kossek, E. E., & Lautsch, B. A. (2018). Work–life flexibility for Whom? Occupational status and work–life inequality in upper, middle, and lower level jobs. *Acad. Manag. Ann.*, 12(1), 5–36. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2016.0059>
- Leana, C. R., & Meuris, J. (2015). Living to work and working to live: income as a driver of organizational behavior. *Acad. Manag. Ann.*, 9(1), 55–95. <https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2015.1007654>
- Lepak, D. P., & Snell, S. A. (1999). The human resource architecture: toward a theory of human capital allocation and development. *Acad. Manag. Rev.*, 24(1), 31–48. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.1580439>
- Luo, B. N., Sun, T., Lin, C.-H. V., Luo, D., Qin, G., & Pan, J. (2021). The human resource architecture model: A twenty-year review and future research directions. *Int. J. Hum. Resour. Manag.*, 32(2), 241–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2020.1787486>
- Lussier, R., & Hendon, J. (2017). *Fundamentals of human resource management: Functions, applications, skill development*. Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, N. L. (2006). *The working life: The labor market for Workers in low-skilled Jobs*. Upjohn Institute: W.E.
- Meuris, J., & Leana, C. (2018). The price of financial precarity: organizational costs of employees' financial concerns. *Organ. Sci.*, 29(3), 398–417. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2017.1187>
- Meuris, J., & Leana, C. R. (2015). The high cost of low wages: economic scarcity effects in organizations. *Res. Organ. Behav.*, 35, 143–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2015.07.001>
- Noe, R., Hollenbeck, J., Gerhart, B., & Wright, P. (2020). *Human resource management (12th edition)*. McGraw Hill.

- Osterman, P. (1987). Choice of employment systems in internal labor markets. *Ind. Relat.*, 26(1), 46–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-232X.1987.tb00693.x>
- Rogers, S. E., Miller, C. D., Flinchbaugh, C., Giddarie, M., & Barker, B. (2021). All internships are not created equal: job design, satisfaction, and vocational development in paid and unpaid internships. *Hum. Resour. Manag. Rev.*, 31(1), Article 100723. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2019.100723>
- Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: a multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, 277(5328), 918–924. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.277.5328.918>
- Sayre, G. M. (2022). The costs of insecurity: pay volatility and health outcomes. *J. Appl. Psychol.* <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001062>
- Schroeder, A. N., Bricka, T. M., & Whitaker, J. H. (2021). Work design in a digitized gig economy. *Hum. Resour. Manag. Rev.*, 31(1), Article 100692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2019.100692>
- Shieler, D. K. (2005). *The working poor: Invisible in America*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.