

Human resource management and project based organising: Fertile ground, missed opportunities and prospects for closer connections



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KEYWORDS

- Human resource management (HRM)
- Project based organising (PBO)
- Supra-project organisational level
- Organisational behaviour (OB)

Article Highlight:

This article reports on publishing trends at the intersection between HRM (human resource management) and PBO (project based organising) in key research-led journals in the project management field.

What does the paper cover?

The paper explores the link between HRM and PBO (the HRM-PBO link). It presents an overview of research over a 20-year period, identifying categories of HRM research at three levels of analysis with sub-categories covering single and multiple HRM practices.

The analysis highlights the theoretical and methodological resources that can be applied to studies in this field, as well as explicitly identifying the project as a temporary organisation, which makes HRM practices visible.

Methodology:

A key word search was undertaken to generate a comprehensive research sample across three main journals in the field of project management: *International Journal of Project Management* (IJPM), *Project Management Journal* (PMJ), *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* (IJMPB). The search included papers published between 1996 and 2016.

The authors extended Wright and Boswell's framework of analysis to differentiate between three different levels of the HRM-PBO link:

- Level 1** The supra-project organisational level: focusing on HRM in the permanent organisation.
- Level 2** Projects as temporary organisations: focusing on HRM on the project.
- Level 3** The individual level: focusing on HRM and individual roles.

In addition, there was differentiation of each level into 'multiple' and 'single' HRM tasks, classed as the 'a' and 'b' strand, respectively.

Research findings:

The article outlines findings under the six sub-categories of analysis and identifies missed opportunities and possible future connections.

Category analysis

	Multiple	Single
Level 1 Supra-project organisational level/permanent organisation(s)/ networks/project ecologies	1a Industrial relations and employee participation Creating high (performance) (involvement) (Commitment) work climates Strong organisational HRM systems Strategic HRM	1b Isolated functions (e.g. performance appraisal, pay-for-performance) and their relationship to permanent organisations /network performance
Level 2 Project as temporary organisation	2a Strong project HRM systems Specific project work climates Strategic project HRM Multiple HRM practices and project performance	2b Isolated functions (e.g. performance appraisal, pay-for-performance) and their relationship to project performance
Level 3 Individual	3a Employment relationship Multiple constituency psychological contracts Ideals Formal/explicit employment contracts Formal/explicit agreements with external project organisations to which seconded/assigned	3b Traditional/functional HRM Industrial/organisation psychology focused on individual level (individual employee commitment, job satisfaction, proactivity, etc.)

Figure 1 Adapted and updated from Wright and Boswell (2002) and applied to HRM in project based organisations

Missed opportunities 1996–2016

- There is a lack of research on employment relationships – individual and collective – in the context of PBO.
- Research into practices for direct employee participation and upward problem solving in the context of PBO is not well-developed.
- How organisations harness the benefits of employee participation and organise this participation is a potentially important research domain to study at the organisational level/within multiple practices.

Prospects for closer connections

Theoretical resources for closer connections

Rich theoretical resources are available in the HRM field for different levels of analysis in single or multiple practices. However, a thorough understanding of literature on project management and project based/project oriented organisations from a contextual perspective is essential to ensure theoretical insights on HRM in PBO are well grounded.

Methodological resources for closer connections

Mainstream organisational behaviour-inspired HRM research, drawing on sophisticated multilevel analysis, can be of value in testing if the outcomes found in non-project contexts that are linked to HRM practices are replicated in a project context.

Multi-actor and organisational perspectives for closer connections

The HRM field can benefit from a richer and more highly contextualised focus on the complex, multi-actor, multi-level and multi-organisational setting of projects, which are increasingly prevalent.

Greater research is required to understand the effects of project interactions in terms of the outcomes they shape and the factors that explain these.

There is a need for significant research to examine the impact for both individuals and organisations of HRM in projects.

Conclusions:

There is an evolving level of attention for HRM as an important area of project studies.

The introduction of the project as a temporary organisation level of analysis explicitly makes HRM practices more visible in the project.

Projects are increasingly a collection of employees from multiple networks, raising potential research questions for HRM.

The articles discussed in this review can provide a starting point to enrich the HRM field and further strengthen the field of project management.

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Significance of the research:

For project managers: The article is a guide for both HRM practitioners and project managers of the importance of projects as sites for human resource management and employment activities. This includes careers, employee participation and employment relations, which are critical issues and deserve more attention.

For researchers: Defining a project as a temporary organisation makes HRM practices more visible, and means a project is presented as an explicit level of analysis. In addition, this study identifies broader areas for this research.

Comment from the authors:

HR in project based organisations is an emerging field and our differentiation and analysis contribute to a better understanding. By using the adapted framework and analysing the project as an explicit level, we can see HRM on the project level and identify new topics that will be useful in future, e.g. careers on projects. Furthermore, by adding the project as an explicit level, we help HR managers and project managers to consider projects as an arena of HRM activities.

We also prepared a short video to present an overview of this paper:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5s1p4N6PUY>

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Complete article:

The original version of this article was published in the *International Journal of Project Management*, Vol number 36.1, Anne Keegan, Claudia Ringhofer & Martina Huemann (2018) p.121–133. It can be accessed via: [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0263786317302922](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0263786317302922).

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