‘Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’: A Longitudinal Analysis of HRM Work and the Profile of Senior HR Managers

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Introduction

Understanding national differences in handling HRM matters is a key area of international management studies (Ricks, Toyne & Martinez, 1990) and is at the heart of the burgeoning field of comparative HRM (see the contributions in Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2012b). There is now considerable evidence that HRM varies significantly between countries, cultures and institutional settings (see, for example, Croucher et al., 2010; Larsen & Mayrhofer, 2006; Scholz & Böhm, 2008). How significant these differences are depends on whether they are evidence of the embeddedness of HRM in national contexts or of varying stages of development and the different pace of learning of organizations from different contexts. The latter would imply that as globalization increases, these differences would become less pronounced.

From a theoretical point of view, there have been two sets of theories that analyse the differences between nations or clusters of nations. One, building on the concept of national culture, including the work of Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), Schwarz (Schwartz, 1992, 1999) and the members of the GLOBE project (Chhokar, Brodbeck & House, 2007; House et al., 2004) argues that specific dimensions of national culture – which vary between nations and groups of nations – influence individuals and collective actors such as organizations. National cultures influence personal and collective values, and these in turn influence individual and organizational behaviour. The second approach, institutional theories, takes a different point of view. These theories view societal institutions as core distinctive characteristics of the respective environment. All social interactions are embedded in this specific setting and have to take into account the formal and informal rules and norms governing a specific setting (Hollingsworth & Boyer, 1997). To be sure, there are quite different and equally successful ways of organizing economic activities (and management) in any capitalist economy (Amable, 2003; Hall & Soskice,
Changes in HRM

2001; Whitley, 1999). But the important thing is that organizations and the way that they operate and work best are embedded in particular national, or groups of national, environments. A key question concerns whether these differences are receding over time with the processes of globalization or whether they remain deeply distinctive.

This chapter contributes to this research by examining how the process of managing human resources has developed over time in different country clusters around the world with a special focus on Europe. We focus on key characteristics of the HRM department itself rather than on HRM practices (for that, see Mayrhofer et al., 2011). We provide a descriptive longitudinal analysis that seeks evidence of the widely discussed shift towards more ‘strategic’ human resource management. Specifically, we examine whether the configuration of the HRM department and the profiles of senior HRM specialists have converged in select (mainly European) countries. To do this we draw on data from the Cranet surveys. Furthermore, reflecting a contextualist approach (Brewster, 1999), we discuss national differences resulting from the interplay of institutional determinants. By examining trends across time, we contribute to the convergence–divergence debate in international HRM (Brewster, Mayrhofer & Morley, 2004).

Given the nature of our sample, our chapter takes a largely European perspective. In Europe, the question of converging or diverging developments in management practices in general and HRM practices in particular has been debated for some time (e.g. Almond, Edwards & Clark 2003; Mayrhofer et al., 2011). This is partly fuelled by the emerging role of the European Union as a major global player, developing and gradually implementing a social policy that applies to all the countries in the European Union and is now widely accepted also in the surrounding states. In turn, this can be regarded as increased institutional pressure creating a push towards convergence of approach to HRM in Europe.

Changes in the world environment

Since the early 1990s, the political, economic and social landscape has changed substantially. In the political sphere, major developments include the collapse of European communism in 1989/90 and the re-emergence of a number of sovereign states which rapidly moved towards capitalism. The greater integration and the expansion of the European Union, with its commitment to the free movement of goods, capital and people, was also significant. Economically, we have witnessed an accelerated pace of globalization, reordering of economic powers, waves of economic expansion and economic decline, several global financial crises, each more severe than the preceding one, volatile currencies, rising competitive pressures across industries and shifts in dominant industries (see, for example, Djelic & Quack, 2003; Drori, Meyer & Hwang, 2006; Tsoukis, Agiomirgianakis & Biswas, 2004).