

## Commentary **SHRM and job design: Narrowing the divide**

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The extant literatures in strategic human resources management (SHRM) and job design have remarkably little in common. The SHRM literature focuses on human resource (HR) management systems as sources of competitive advantage, and employees as strategic assets. HR management systems and employee talent are thought of as part of a strategic architecture that has a managerially significant influence on the firm's financial performance. The focus is macro and the intellectual motivations blend HR with strategy, economics, and finance (Becker & Huselid, 2006). By contrast, the job design literature is largely micro and focuses on the nature and structure of work itself. The very centrality of work in the life of most people means that job or work design, and the impact of those design elements on job incumbents, is a compelling research focus. The SHRM framework clearly locates the job as a means to an end, achieving the organization's strategic goals. Given the central role work plays in our lives, the job design literature tends to focus more on the social and psychological influences on individuals in those jobs. While the potential contribution of the job to organizational performance is not entirely ignored in the job design literature, the focus is at the level of individual performance much like the traditional HR literature.

Recent work in both areas, however, suggests several opportunities to narrow the divide. Reviews of the job design literature highlight the importance of changes in the economic environment, and the resulting changes in the nature of work from manufacturing to service and "knowledge work". While acknowledging the remarkable contributions of the field, there are increasing calls to broaden its focus in response to this changing environment. Grant and Parker (in press) describe this extension as a relational perspective emphasizing the "social systems of work". Kilduff and Brass (2010) and Morgeson and Humphrey (2008) have a similar theme emphasizing integration with the network and team literatures, respectively. As the job design literature broadens its reach, recent work in SHRM has highlighted the job as a core unit of analysis. Since its inception, the SHRM literature has focused on the problem of the "black box," or elucidating the causal processes through which investments in HR management systems affect firm performance (Becker & Gerhart, 1996). As the empirical relationship between systems of HR practices and firm performance was replicated in multiple samples, industries and countries (Combs, Ketchen, Hall, & Liu, 2006), there has been an increasing interest in an elaboration of the processes and variables that mediate that relationship. Particular attention has

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focused on strategy execution and implementation as the key mediating process, with a resulting emphasis on what have been termed “strategic” jobs.

This commentary will focus on how the notion of strategic jobs can represent a common ground between the SHRM and job design literatures. We begin with a brief review of the essential elements of SHRM, with particular emphasis on our own recent thinking about the direction of the field. Our work gives particular theoretical prominence to the strategic job, and serves as an appropriate bridge to the job design literature. We highlight several of the acknowledged intellectual trends in the field, though the reader will quickly realize that we are not experts in job design. Nevertheless, we find several opportunities where job design scholars might contribute to SHRM, and hope we have identified several contributions that the SHRM perspective might make to job design as well.

## The Growth of SHRM and a Key Gap

While the notion of a strategic perspective on HR had been gaining momentum for several years (Schuler, 1992), it wasn't until the publication in the 1990s of several empirical papers establishing a link between HR and firm performance, that the field achieved its current prominence (Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995). Indeed four of the ten most cited papers in the 50-plus year history of the *Academy of Management Journal* are in the field of SHRM.<sup>1</sup> Interest in SHRM paralleled a growing recognition that intangible assets were an increasingly important source of competitive advantage, and human capital was more than an expense to be minimized.

Much like the divide between SHRM and job design, SHRM is an important departure from traditional HR. Theoretically SHRM is more motivated by the strategy literature (Wright, Dunford & Snell, 2001) than I/O psychology. The emphasis is on a system of HR practices as a source of competitive advantage rather than the structure and effects of single HR practices. HR could be one aspect of a comprehensive approach to strategic management, rather than just a collection of tools and techniques. Both literatures have a strong focus on performance, but the level of analysis is different. Traditional HR research emphasizes individual job performance while the strategic focus of SHRM means there is much more attention to business and strategic level outcomes.

Indeed the dependent variables in much of SHRM research are one of the reasons why the field has been so influential on the practice of HR. Recall the recent dialogue in *The Academy of Management Review* lamenting the lack of influence of management research compared to the field of economics. Bazerman (2005) made the point that in fact management research does have influence when it focuses on variables that are important to senior managers. The SHRM literature is evidence in support of that assessment. Following the strategy literature, the dependent variables in the SHRM literature are dimensions of firm financial performance (shareholder value, accounting measures of profitability, and labor productivity) that managers easily understand, and value. That makes the impact of HR on those variables inherently interesting as well. Scholarship that is ultimately relevant to management practice, or public policy, is a virtuous circle that reinforces its prominence and impact, both academically and in practice. Despite this success the field of SHRM faces some of the same challenges as job design. Empirically, the field is relatively mature. Despite a continuing discussion around the role of endogeneity (Guest et al., 2003) and measurement error (Gerhart et al., 2000; Huselid & Becker, 2000) in the prior empirical work, there is a broad consensus around a managerially significant positive direct relationship between *high performance* HR systems and firm performance (Combs et al., 2006). A more significant

<sup>1</sup>Based on citations from Google Scholar using Harzing's *Publish or Perish*.

challenge for SHRM is the tenuous link between the specification of the empirical models and the underlying theoretical rationales that motivate this literature. Efforts to narrow that gap within the SHRM literature represent a significant opportunity to narrow the divide between SHRM and job design.

The most common empirical specification in the SHRM literature is a regression of a measure of firm or business performance on an additive index of HR practices, with suitable controls for other firm and industry characteristics that might influence both HR and firm performance. The system of HR practices is sometimes called a *high performance work system* (HPWS) because it emphasizes those dimensions of HR practices thought to influence workforce performance. Among other characteristics, a *high performance* system would, for example, have a clear link between rewards and employee performance, put more emphasis on employee development and use more valid selection methods.

While the empirical literature is sometimes divided into universalistic, contingent and configuration hypotheses (Delery and Doty, 1996), from the perspective of the underlying theoretical motivation for SHRM, these are simply variations on a “best practice” theme. The universalistic hypothesis implies that one HPWS fits all organizations, and “more is better.” The contingent hypothesis argues that the appropriate HPWS varies with the firm’s strategy, but the strategic choices used in the prior work typically reflect only two or three very general archetypes (Porter, 1996). The configurational hypothesis posits that the structure of the HPWS is more complex and not a simple additive index of practice characteristics. In fact there may be different combinations of practices that are equally effective. However, while the contingent and configurational hypotheses go beyond the one size fits all approach of the universalistic hypothesis, theoretically they are just as limited as a source of competitive advantage.

We describe the three current empirical specifications as limited, because while the contingent and configurational approaches are not one size fits all, they are really “a few sizes fit all.” Arguing for one universal HPWS, or two or three, is inconsistent with a theoretical justification for the HR systems as a source of competitive advantage. The strategy literature emphasizes that a strategic resource must not only be valuable, but also inimitable. In other words, a narrow set of HR systems that are easily understood, or contingent on a small number of broad strategy options, are easy to imitate. They may be valuable, but once that value is recognized, these practices should be widely adopted and any competitive advantage would disappear.

### *A new focus on the “strategic job”*

The gap between the underlying theoretical rationale for the HR-firm performance relationship and empirical specifications of that relationship, is reflected in continuing efforts to elaborate on the “black box” between HR and firm performance. We have recently suggested a new direction for SHRM research that would focus on the underlying strategic processes in this black box. This new focus significantly raises the theoretical prominence of what we call the strategic job (Becker & Huselid, 2006).

Strategic jobs make a disproportionate contribution to the effective implementation of a strategic capability, and represent the nexus between the appropriately differentiated HR system and HR’s strategic impact. Strategic jobs can appear at any level in the organization, but they all share the common characteristics of *rarity* (generally less than 15 per cent of a firm’s jobs), *strategic impact* (they generally directly affect a firm’s ability to executing its strategy through its strategic capability), and *incumbent performance variability* (the gap between high and low employee performance) in these roles is usually substantial, which provides the context for intervention and improvement (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005; Becker & Huselid, 2006; Becker, Huselid, & Beatty, 2009).

The focus on the “black box” in SHRM reflects both the theoretical and managerial distance between the HR system and firm performance. One approach has been to focus on less distal outcomes (Gerhart, 2005), in effect shrinking the black box. We understand the methodological convenience of

this approach, but believe that it moves the field away from its underlying strategic focus. Alternatively, we argue in favor of a more direct focus on strategically relevant mediators in the HR-firm performance relationship (Becker & Huselid, 2006).

This perspective is briefly summarized as follows. A central theme in the resource based view of strategy is that organizational capabilities are an important source of competitive advantage. They are firm specific and embedded in the organization, which increases their inimitability (Makadok, 2001). More importantly, as “intermediate goods” (Amit & Shoemaker, 1993), they can explicate the HR-firm performance relationship. While the notion of capabilities is sometimes criticized as vague and tautological, we follow Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) and Ray *et al.* (2004) and focus on capabilities as well-defined business processes (e.g., product development, alliancing). According to Ray *et al.* (2004, p. 26) business processes “are the way that the competitive potential of the firm’s resources and capabilities are realized and which deserve study in their own right.”

Realizing competitive potential reflects another developing theme in the strategy literature; namely an emphasis on strategy execution and implementation. As Barney (2001, p. 54) notes, “the ability to implement strategies is, by itself, a resource that can be a source of competitive advantage.” Together a focus on strategic capabilities, and the implementation of those capabilities, provides a clearer theoretical framework for the “black box” in the HR-firm performance link. It suggests that HR’s strategic impact does not operate through its effect on the entire workforce, but is disproportionately concentrated in those strategic capabilities. This in turn means a strategic HR system should reflect the human capital requirements of a firm’s strategic capabilities, rather than a generic strategic type (i.e., cost efficiency) or industry standard (or benchmark). Our emphasis on differentiation is driven by the strategic imperative to focus on building a competitive advantage. Differentiation in the HR and workforce system means developing an inimitable system of practices that improve performance in an organization’s strategic jobs. This leads to the expectation that an organization’s strategic HR system will not simply follow an industry pattern or best practice in the profession. We agree with Davis (2010) that historically HR practices reflect the homogenizing influences described by new institutional theory. A properly articulated SHRM framework should provide the conceptual and managerial rationale to break with that tradition.

## Narrowing the Divide

Despite what we have described as a relatively significant divide between these two literatures, there are a number of opportunities for each to benefit from the other. For job design, the benefits are largely contingent on whether scholars in the field want to follow the lead of their colleagues in HR and extend their work to what might be termed “strategic job design”. For SHRM, with an increased focus on strategic jobs, job design offers several opportunities to strengthen both our theoretical and empirical work.

### *How SHRM might contribute to job design*

#### **Extend the scope of influence**

In his commentary, Baron (2010) encourages job design scholars to consider moving from a focus on micro-level individual outcomes to firm-level outcomes. While Baron’s suggestion is within the context of entrepreneurship, it is an equally important lesson from SHRM. We’ve described how the impact of SHRM has benefited from the managerial relevance of its dependent variables. From our perspective the field of job design seems to focus on “the job” largely as an opportunity to field test

theories of social psychology. We are simply encouraging job design scholars to broaden that perspective to include how job design can also drive important business outcomes.

By important business outcomes, we really mean outcomes that either directly reflect strategic success (profitability, shareholder value, etc.), or mediators (strategic capabilities) that clearly drive that strategic success. The challenge is to distinguish between job performance that might have financial value, and job performance that contributes to the organization's competitive advantage. Consider the case of Walmart. Staff behavior at the check-out counter might create some efficiency gains as they process customers more quickly, but those jobs are not strategic jobs and those financial gains do not contribute to Walmart's competitive advantage. Walmart competes on its logistic capabilities, not the customer buying experience. The designation of a strategic job is a top down analysis that begins with the strategy, and concludes with an assessment of a job's role in that strategy. Evidence that links job design elements to financial outcomes (e.g., Grant, 2008) may meet that standard, but it depends upon the contribution of those financial outcomes to the firm's strategic success. Similarly turnover only has a strategic consequence when it occurs in those strategic jobs and reduces performance in those jobs.

The difference between strategic jobs and non-strategic jobs in part reflects the difference between strategic success and operational excellence, to use Porter (1996) terms. Just because a decision saves a company money, or even increases revenue, does not make it strategic. Strategy is about finding a way to earn profits above and beyond what might be expected from operational excellence (i.e., good basic management). Our point about Walmart is that whether the customer buying experience adds or loses a few customers for Walmart, that isn't their competitive advantage. So the jobs that drive that customer buying experience are not strategic for that company. On the other hand, sales people at a high end retail outlet are very likely strategic. So, it's not just about job performance having a financial impact. Presumably all jobs do, or they would be eliminated.

While the job design literature certainly includes performance outcomes as part of its focus, high performance work systems have performance as their primary focus. The HR literature recognizes that the elements of an HR system, like selection or compensation, might have a range of goals, including equity and efficiency considerations. However, a high performance work system within an SHRM framework only focuses on the performance dimension of those elements. Extending the influence of job design will require a similar attention to performance issues.

SHRM provides one potential theoretical link between the job and firm-level success. It provides some content to what might otherwise be a black box between job design and firm-level outcomes. Indeed the one direction that we strongly advise against is taking existing empirical job design models and simply changing the dependent variables. The SHRM literature certainly highlights the role of job performance as an influence on the ultimate strategic success of the organization, but more importantly makes the point that not all job performance has strategic value.

### **Extend task significance to strategic significance**

Task significance is the extent to which a job has an impact on other people inside and outside the organization (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Task significance thus describes the impact of the job on other individuals. Likewise, efforts to expand that literature, such as using relational models (Grant and Parker, in press) to explore how task significance can explain prosocial motivations and behaviors, are still located within that traditional boundary.

Following our previous suggestion to extend the scope of influence, we would also encourage job design scholars to extend the notion of task significance beyond the impact on individuals to include the impact on the organization. While the notion that jobs can influence strategy is not new to the job design literature (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995), or the HR literature for that matter, our approach provides a theoretically derived framework for understanding how to determine which jobs

actually have a strategic impact, and how that impact works through the strategy implementation process. This strategic value would be expected to ultimately influence financial measures like shareholder return or return on assets, but the increasing attention to strategy implementation suggests important opportunities to focus on intermediate outcomes as well.

While it might be possible to broaden the construct of task significance to include this wider influence, it may be more productive to simply develop a separate construct called *strategic significance*. Methodologically this means that job design researchers, like those in SHRM, first need to establish that a job is indeed a strategic job. This may require samples from narrow industry niches, or case studies, where there is greater confidence in the line of sight between a particular job and strategic success (see Becker & Huselid, 2006 for an extended discussion of this issue).

### **Adopting a strategic perspective**

The suggestion to extend the scope of influence, and consider strategic significance as well as task significance, requires a different perspective on job design. Like SHRM before it, job design needs to adopt a strategic perspective on the field. The SHRM literature can serve as an example, though we continue to struggle with this challenge. It requires a meaningful commitment to interdisciplinary models that can challenge our own disciplinary comfort levels.

SHRM draws on a strong theoretical motivation from the strategy literature, most importantly on the emphasis on building competitive advantage as the basis of a sustainable effect on firm performance. Following a similar path the job design literature will need to be equally mindful of that strategic motivation. This means not just more attention to those elements of job design that might affect job performance, but more importantly how those performance effects might create a competitive advantage. In its simplest form, competitive advantage requires both some form of value creation, but also that this value creation is not easily copied by competitors. The elements of job design are inherently more difficult to observe than an HR practice, but inimitability is more broadly a characteristic of the entire strategy implementation process. What's important is the alignment between those job design attributes and the idiosyncratic requirements of the organization's strategic capabilities. This remains a challenge for the SHRM literature as well. The level of inimitability reflected in the extant empirical literature would raise some question about the sustainability of the reported HR-firm performance relationships.

### *How job design might contribute to SHRM*

Typically there has been little consideration of conventional attributes of job design in the SHRM framework. This is no doubt largely a reflection of a theoretical focus in the job design literature that does little to inform an organizational level strategic impact. However there are several opportunities where job design might strengthen and enrich SHRM model.

### **Broaden the existing HPWS construct**

While there is no one accepted measure for the HPWS construct, there is generally little attention paid to traditional notions of job design. What's missing is a theoretical logic that links job design to the kinds of strategic outcomes that are the focus of the SHRM literature. Part of this theoretical rationale would need to incorporate the elements of job design into the systems framework that is the foundation of the SHRM literature. Is job design a simple additive extension to a range of workforce practices and policies, or does it complement or substitute for other elements of the system? Most importantly, as we've already mentioned, there needs to be a strong emphasis on performance, both at the individual and organizational level.

### **Extend interdependence to define limits of strategic jobs**

Task interdependence is an important dimension of job design. Grant and Parker (in press) point out that prior work focuses on the psychological and behavioral consequences of interdependence, and offer some alternative explanations for the extant empirical relationships. With a more strategic focus, job design theory could offer an important theoretical and measurement contribution to the evolving SHRM literature. Work in SHRM focuses on jobs that disproportionately influence strategic success. This requires more thinking about the boundaries of the strategic job category. The attributes of a strategic job have been defined (Huselid, Beatty and Becker, 2005; Becker & Huselid, 2006; Becker, Huselid, & Beatty, 2009) in both the academic and managerial literatures, and emphasize both the impact on strategic success and the potential variability of that impact. This is similar to the contextual focus on “consequence of failure” or error criticality in the job design literature (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2008). Avoiding significant performance failures (airline pilots) can be as important as taking advantage of significant performance gains.

However this analysis is in a relatively nascent stage in the SHRM literature and the notion of strategic jobs has largely ignored interdependencies among those jobs and other apparently non-strategic jobs. We expect goal interdependence beyond the strategic job, as the firm wants most of the employees to understand how their job contributes to strategic success. An intermediate strategic goal may even be a part of the reward structure for many employees. The question is how much the performance in a strategic job depends on interdependence, both task and goal, with what appears to be non-strategic jobs? At what point does the interdependence become so significant that boundaries between jobs have little meaning? What is the boundary that determines whether a “strategic job” is really a part of a larger collective, whether or not it is designated as a formal team? Kilduff and Brass (2010) have suggested extending the job design literature to include a network perspective. Instead of the job, it is the flow of work through a network that is the unit of analysis. Would SHRM be better served by thinking in terms of strategic networks instead of strategic jobs? The notion of strategic jobs is probably what one would expect in a hub-and-spoke network. But are decentralized networks more effective for some strategies? Are they inherently more inimitable and therefore more supportive of a sustainable competitive advantage? Can job design theory help us understand the nature of any performance differences? In particular what elements of job design, if any, are critical to the success of those strategic jobs, or networks?

Indeed, a focus on strategic networks also raises important questions about the nature of the employment relationship itself. The shift toward outsourcing many types of jobs conventionally performed in house (e.g., compensation and benefits administration, supply chain, logistics, maintenance, etc.) is well documented. We know considerably less about the processes managers use to make these decisions and the ultimate impact on firm performance. One notable example is Castellano (2008), who developed a model to predict the optimal type of workforce management system based on the interdependency and criticality of the work to be performed (see also Cummings & Blumberg, 1987). Consistent with our focus on strategic jobs, Castellano’s approach provides a specific example of the opportunities that a closer link between job design and the SHRM literature affords.

### **Focus on strategic jobs as a new context**

The job design literature has evolved to reflect the context of work, as the economy transforms from manufacturing labor to knowledge work. The notion of strategic jobs and an emphasis on a differentiated workforce is suggesting a new context, strategic jobs, and non-strategic jobs. Other than their potential contribution to strategic success, these jobs may appear to have little in common. Whether comparing them within or across organizations, they vary by traditional job level and characteristics. They are considered strategic because the value creation process in their organization relies disproportionately on their contribution. These could include pipeline repairmen in a petroleum

distribution company and relationship managers in a regional bank. Neither would fit into the traditional high profile job categories in their organizations, but a careful analysis of each organization's strategy execution process revealed that each of these jobs was indeed crucial to success. The job design literature could make a significant contribution to the SHRM literature by simply extending extant job design models to the context of strategic and non-strategic jobs. Does prior work in job design apply equally to these contexts, in particular to the strategic jobs? What can the job design literature tell us about the effects of a differentiated workforce strategy in a particular organization? What are the social and psychological consequences of making a disproportionate investment in a few strategic jobs? Do those individual consequences translate into effects on organizational performance? Can the notion of "job crafting" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) be extended to strategy execution, where job incumbents make their jobs more strategic?

### **Offer insight into new roles in the HR function**

One reason for the broad interest in the SHRM framework is the implications for the practice of HR. It offers an opportunity for an entirely different organizational role for HR professionals. Job design scholars could also contribute to the transformation of HR practice by extending their analysis to these new roles. Much of the early work in this area would probably be more prescriptive, drawing on the implications of existing models for these new roles. Empirical work would require more case studies as these new roles are only now emerging, and the availability of broad based cross sectional data quite limited. This is consistent with recommendations for different methodologies in job design research (Grant, Fried, Parker, & Frese, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The divide between job design and SHRM is not likely to be narrowed significantly in the near term. There is a fundamental difference in the questions and theoretical frameworks motivating these literatures. Nevertheless, there are some opportunities to begin a mutually beneficial dialogue. We have suggested several directions that could yield productive research inquiries, including:

- drawing on job design theory to help delineate the boundaries of "strategic jobs,"
- developing a theoretical rationale for *strategic* job design that can extend the boundaries of the field, and
- broaden the concept of high performance work systems

In short, SHRM offers real opportunities for the kind of cross-level and cross-disciplinary extensions of job design that are the goals of this Special Issue.

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