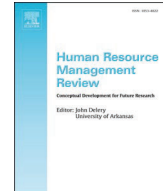




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Disrupted HR?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss possible avenues for future research aimed at bridging the research-practice gap on the topic of disruptions in human resources (HR). I focus on three global mega-trends—the flexible workforce, the digitalization of business models, and artificial intelligence and machine learning—and examine their influence on the field of human resource management (HRM) in general and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I discuss why HRM research has overlooked potential paradigm-shifting possibilities that could ultimately equip HR practitioners with the knowledge needed to respond to disruptions caused by these mega-trends.

1. Introduction

“Disruption”—the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as “an interruption in the usual way that a system, process, or event works,” and as something that prevents the system, process, or event, from “continuing as usual or as expected” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Numerous consultancy reports warn human resources (HR) professionals about the need to deal with disruptions, such as the digital revolution, automation, artificial intelligence (AI), and the like. In fact, the term “future of work” entered the HR vocabulary to capture the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding changes in work, the workforce, and the workplace that must take place to close the gaps between technological advancements and employees’ current skills. Within organizations, leaders are preoccupied with business transformations and demand support from HR in making those transformations happen. In 2017, Deloitte’s *Global Human Capital Trends* report provided the results of a survey of more than 10,000 HR and business leaders, which confirmed that these demands are viewed as reasonable and that HR has a unique role to play in closing the gaps among technology, individuals, businesses, society, and governments (Deloitte, 2017; see Fig. 2 in the report). The report argues that all HR needs to do is rewrite its own rules. Three years and thousands of failed business transformations later, HR professionals still do not know which rules should be rewritten and why. What are the disrupters? What is being disrupted? Why should HR professionals pay attention and rewrite the rules?

In their search for answers to these questions, HR professionals turn to researchers in the field of human resource management (HRM)—researchers who study the processes of “developing, applying and evaluating policies, procedures, methods and programs relating to the individual in the organization” (Miner & Crane, 1995: 5). Unfortunately, as a research field, HRM has more questions than answers, as demonstrated by the numerous calls for special issues on the topics of disruption, transformation, and “future of work” in the leading HR-related journals (see, e.g., the calls for papers for *Human Resource Management* special issues on “Strategic Human Resource Management in the Era of Environmental Disruptions” and “The Ecosystem of Work and Organization: Theoretical Frameworks and Future Directions”). The research-practice gap on the topic of disruptions in HR is wide and broadening (Deadrick & Gibson, 2009; DeNisi, Wilson, & Biteman, 2014).

This paper aims to identify possible avenues for future research with the aim of bridging the research-practice gap on the topic of disruptions in HR. In contrast to previous attempts (Deadrick & Gibson, 2007), my starting point lies in the practice space. Specifically,

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I zoom in on three global mega-trends—the flexible workforce, the digitalization of business models, and AI and machine learning—that HR professionals have long heralded as disruptive forces that will significantly influence the future of HR. I then investigate why HRM research has been slow to engage with and embrace these disruptive forces in order to explore possible paradigm-shifting possibilities within HRM research that could ultimately equip HR practitioners with the knowledge needed to respond to disruptions caused by these mega-trends. In particular, I argue that one reason for the wide research-practice gap on the topic of disruptions in HR is the inability of the HRM field to let go of several dogmatic assumptions that have been created and enforced by the field’s legacy mindset. As HR practice shows, certain assumptions need to be released because they have been challenged, if not disrupted, by the rise of digital technologies, changes in global demographics, and the emergence of competitive threats that demand the development of product or service innovations at a faster pace.

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the effects of the identified global mega-trends on the ways we understand, organize and do our work. This crisis’ experience is giving us a taste of how a future with a flexible workforce and digitalized business models will look, and how the introduction of digital technologies into HR can help HR practitioners deal with new challenges. In this regard, I argue that the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and accentuated the disruptors identified here. It also highlighted the opportunities HR has to deal with them and to enable the transformation to the “next normal.” Hence, in this paper, I utilize relevant experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic to further illustrate the disruptive effects of the identified global mega-trends and point to possible organizational responses.

In the following, I consider two questions for each of the three global mega-trends: “What is being disrupted in HR practice?” and “What kind of paradigm shift is needed within HRM research to equip HR professionals with the knowledge required to deal with these disruptions?”. I offer three guidelines for future theoretical and empirical work in HRM, and provide examples of potential research questions. [Table 1](#) summarizes the main arguments.

2. Disruptors

Numerous practice-orientated publications have identified a long list of trends influencing HR practice (see, e.g., [PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2020](#), and [Deloitte, 2020](#)). This paper focuses on three trends that every publication refers to as global mega-trends that significantly affect the “future of work”: the flexible workforce, the digitalization of business models, and AI and machine learning.¹

2.1. A flexible workforce

Growing workforce flexibility has increasingly provided employees with more freedom of choice regarding employment relations, leaving employers to face the challenge of building work environments that can accommodate employees’ choices. For example, employers are expected to respond to the workplace expectations of millennials and members of Generation Z related to career flexibility and purposeful work. Although these groups account for most of today’s global workforce, employers have generally been unsuccessful in meeting their expectations ([Deloitte, 2016](#)). At the other extreme, the aging of the population pushes employers to create special opportunities for the development, performance, and retention of older workers, including workplace flexibility. Furthermore, although the gig economy is still relatively new—[PriceWaterhouseCoopers \(2020\)](#) reports that it makes up only 2% of the total recruitment market—the OECD expects it to grow rapidly in the coming years. In fact, an increase in the use of digital technologies is likely to swing the labor market towards a per-task basis and away from permanent forms of employment ([Schwellnus, Geva, Pak, & Veiel, 2019](#)). The experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic confirms: demand for free-lancers and temporary workers will increase over the next two years compared to the pre-crisis period ([McKinsey, 2020](#)). Even organizations with traditional forms of employment will be affected by these realities. They will also be required to undergo colossal shifts in their organizational mindsets and reconsider some basic assumptions about work, the workforce, and the workplace.

What kind of paradigm shifts are needed within HRM research to equip HR professionals with the knowledge required to deal with the disruption brought about by increasing workforce flexibility? I argue that this disruption pushes us to revisit the key assumption in HRM research: the assumption that employment relations are bounded by space, time, and task-based job descriptions, all based on the employer’s choices. This assumption is one of the cornerstones of HRM research. As a field, HRM originates from Taylorism’s work design and functional structures, and the majority of its most influential models draw from (labor) economics (see [Andersson, Brewster, Minbaeva, Narula, & Wood, 2019](#), for a review). The HRM field has attempted to adapt to the emergence of new organizational forms, such as relationship- and network-based organizations (see [Ulrich & Dulebon, 2015](#), for a review). However, the field is still ultimately based on the notion of tasks that can be clustered into jobs, for which the HR function creates job descriptions. Everything we know about HR is based on the ideas of permanent organizations, permanent structures, chains of command, and tasks organized into jobs.

This is not to say that HRM research has been inattentive to various developments, such as flexible work practices (e.g., [Avgoustaki & Bessa, 2019](#)), temporary organizations (e.g., [Flinchbaugh, Zare, Chadwick, Li, & Essman, 2020](#)); and project-based organizations (e.

¹ There may be other important mega-trends. However, given space restrictions, I decided to start with these three and leave the others for future research. The importance of the chosen mega-trends was also confirmed in numerous conversations with HR managers and consultants. However, I don’t mean to imply any hierarchy in mega-trends as the relative importance of mega-trends may vary across regions (e.g., the aging workforce in Japan and Singapore).

Table 1
Main arguments.

Global mega-trends disrupting HR practice	What is being disrupted in HR practice?	What kind of paradigm shift is needed within HRM research to equip HR professionals with the knowledge required to deal with this disruption?	
		Knowledge required	Examples of guiding research questions
Flexible workforce	The concept that employment relations take place within a bounded space and a structured time, and with a task-based job description	Need for a broader frame of reference that focuses on the relationships between actors and actions in the context of diverse, temporal organizational forms	How are actors and their actions affected when organizational permanence no longer exists? What HR theoretical assumptions must be revisited and amended when time, task, and space are no longer bound?
Digitalization of business models	Need to reinvent HR's organizational value proposition by switching the focus from employees to customers	<i>Need to introduce fundamental changes to how HR delivers business value while digitally transforming the existing core</i>	What are the processes, drivers, and consequences of the duality of digital for HR? How can organizations create value from human capital under the new digital business models?
AI and machine learning	Need to embed AI and machine learning in existing HR processes without triggering unintended consequences	Need to address how digital technologies (via balanced automation and augmentation) can support HR in building legitimacy in their organizations	What should be automated in HR and what must be kept augmented? How can AI and machine learning assist in building the legitimacy of HR in the workplaces of the future?

g., [Stjerne, Söderlund, & Minbaeva, 2019](#)). However, that research still operates under the assumption that a permanent organization with traditional employment relations exists. As such, flexibility and non-permanency are treated as additional offerings and complementary forms. For example, pointing to the “concomitant rise of temporary organizing principles in and across the firms” ([Bakker et al., 2016](#), p. 1703), the HRM literature on temporary organizations often looks at “how are the actors and their actions, and more specifically, our related theoretical assumptions affected when organizational endurance or permanence no longer holds” ([Burke & Morley, 2016](#), p. 1252). Regardless of the importance of this question, I encourage HRM researchers to take it one step further by asking: “What theoretical assumptions do we in the HRM field need to change or challenge when organizational permanence no longer holds?”

Another example is the broad stream of literature on flexible work practices and telework (see [Spieler, Scheibe, Stamov-Robnagel, & Kappas, 2017](#), for a review). We know a great deal about the positive and negative consequences of telework (see, e.g., the meta-analysis by [Gajendran & Harrison, 2007](#)) from both the employee and employer perspectives (see, e.g., [Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012](#)). However, with only a few exceptions (see, e.g., the definition by [Bailey & Kurland, 2002](#)), flexible work practices and telework are understood and operationalized in empirical studies as an additional form of work that exists as an add-on to traditional employment arrangements. In other words, employees are expected to work outside of permanent structures (space and time) for only “some portion of their work schedule” ([Gajendran & Harrison, 2007](#): 1525). This work structure can “deviate from a default nine-to-five, 5-day-a-week schedule ... [but employees are] still required to clock in and out about the same number of hours every day, and take breaks at clearly defined times” ([Spieler, et al., 2017](#): 68). Therefore, HRM research is still characterized by a dominant assumption that binds time, task, and place together—an assumption found in HRM research since the emergence of the Industrial Revolution.

Recent experiences with working during the COVID-19 pandemic gave us a taste of a “future of work” in which time, task, and place are not coupled together. The crisis changed the world of HR professionals overnight ([www.hrexecutive.com](#)). In fact, it clearly highlighted significant gaps in our research—“answers to questions we *wish* we had in the academic literature but, to date, do not” ([Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020](#): 705). “Virtual work” emerged as an umbrella term that combines different forms of distributed work ([Bélanger, Collins, & Cheney, 2001](#)), full-time telework ([Davenport, 2005](#)), and all forms of self-management ([Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017](#)). However, the term remains ambiguous and has yet to be defined by HRM researchers, partly due to the legacy mindset and dogmatic assumptions that limit our frame of reference to the permanent structures in employment relations. To advance, we need a much broader theoretical frame of reference—one that accommodates temporary organizational forms, platforms, and ecosystems as well as a world in which organizational boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. This frame of reference must be formed around problem solving by groups of relative strangers with diverse professional skills ([Bennis, 1969](#)), and it must focus on the relationships between actors and actions in the context of diverse temporal structures.

Given the above, I propose the following guideline for future research:

Guideline 1. In order to understand the effects of the disruption brought about by an increasingly flexible workforce and formulate a response to that disruption, future theoretical work in HRM should adopt a broader frame of reference that focuses on the relationships between actors and actions in the context of diverse, temporal organizational forms.

One potentially useful theoretical lens for creating such a broad frame of reference is the strategic relational human resources (SRHR) framework. At its core, SRHR is about the development of relational coordination—“a mutually reinforcing web of communication and relationships carried out for the purpose of task integration” ([Gittell, Seidner, & Wimbush, 2010](#), p. 491). The concept of relational coordination has recently been found to be useful for more comprehensively capturing the effects of workforce diversity by suggesting a mediating process that simultaneously covers relational and informational aspects ([Whee Lee & Kim, 2020](#)). However, its potential remains unexplored. Furthermore, in temporal organizational forms, a relational approach to coordination may be more

effective than the traditional bureaucratic form of organizing through a chain of command, hierarchies, administrative systems, and processes in which coordination is primarily carried out by managers at the top of functional silos. Relational coordination is carried out through direct contact among employees on the front line through networks that cut across functional boundaries at the point of contact with the customer. Future research should not only consider the benefits of the SRHR framework for understanding the context of temporary organizational forms but also evaluate its limitations.

2.2. Digitalization of business models

In almost every industry, the digitalization of business models is regarded as one of the biggest disruptions. Digital technologies have a profound effect on how organizations create and deliver value to their customers. Moreover, companies have to reinvent their business models by integrating technologies into their internal organization, administration, operations, and strategy (Deloitte, 2017). Digitalization of business models accelerated since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Many executives will agree with the Microsoft's CEO who said; "We've seen two years' worth of digital transformation in two months."²

With regard to the digitalization of business models, strategy literature emphasizes the importance of drawing a clear conceptual line between becoming digitized (as a result of digitization) and becoming digital (as a consequence of digitalization). As Ross and Beath (2019) explain, digitization is about achieving operational excellence using the advances offered by digital technologies. However, becoming digital is a completely different exercise. It is not about HR or any other business function, but about the creation of *information-enriched customer solutions delivered as seamless, personalized customer experiences* (Ross & Beath, 2019).

For HR, digitization implies the introduction of profound digital discipline into all processes and systems as well as the achievement of operational efficiency and cost optimization through the application of digital tools. However, as Conroy and Minbaeva (2020) argue, this digital "face-lifting" of HR is hardly enough, as "doing digital" (as a result of digitization) is vastly different from "being digital" (as a consequence of business model digitalization). For HR, the starting point of a digital transformation towards "being digital" should be to first re-center on the customer experience, and then revamp HR processes through continuous innovation and experimentation to ensure that employees can deliver the new customer experience.

Notably, digitization is an important enabler of digitalization. Corporate HR functions have digitalized their recruitment systems, upgraded performance-management processes, and established application-based strategic workforce planning. Data-orientated approaches create opportunities to gain new knowledge about how to deliver *information-enriched customer solutions. This is why digitization and digitalization are always discussed together, even though "digitized is not digital."*³ There is an emphasis on the "duality of digital"—the need to introduce fundamental changes in how we deliver business value while digitally transforming the core.

What kind of paradigm shift is needed within HRM research to provide HR professionals with the knowledge required to deal with the disruption brought about by the digitalization of business models and, relatedly, the need to manage the duality of digital? I argue that the main opportunities relate to turning away from the utopian 'HR practices → organizational performance' cul-de-sac. Our dogmatic thinking in this line of research, which is focused on improving short-term financial and operational results, leads HR professionals away from the duality of digital. It distracts them from searching for and exploring new methods of value creation, as the priorities all point in one direction—achieving operational excellency by "doing things better" (i.e., leaner, more aligned, and more efficient in all stages of the annual wheel), opposite from "doing things differently". We need to come up with a logic and formulate arguments that can persuasively push HR away from continuous optimization of the old-fashioned annual wheel of HR processes with the help of digitization ("doing digital") and shift its attention towards new methods of customer-centered value creation via digitalization ("being digital"), thereby accommodating the duality of digital.

The crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has once again highlighted the irrelevance of short-term performance as an outcome of HR practices. During the lockdown, no one talked about performance. Instead, the focus was on resilience, agility, and bouncing back. In fact, our qualitative research⁴ during the pandemic shows that although the level of productivity remained, the executives were much more worried about the employees' well-being and stress (see also the results from the survey by BCG, 2020). The crisis also offered a preview of how companies could handle the duality of digital. For all companies, the crisis accelerated digitization—we all quickly adapted to the new normal by embracing the technologies and accommodating their shortcomings. To follow up, HR needs to at least tackle the following question: "How can we in HR use the benefits of collective digital fluency to improve the digital offerings we provide to the organization?". In many companies, HR functions quickly moved all of their processes online—every step of the employee experience, from onboarding to training and performance appraisals, had to be reinvented in the digital space. Some managed the virtual transition better than others. Those who did well were creative in their out-of-the-box thinking and utilized existing technologies across functional silos. For example, Nextdoor, like millions of other companies, had to onboard the whole company to the new situation of "working from home" from one day to the next. The HR team used its externally orientated recruitment system to move all employees onto a virtual, customer-centered platform. Although this required changes in the content, the structure and technology were already there.

In addition to benefiting from the highest level of collective digital fluency ever seen in HR processes, some organizations took an additional crucial step. They managed to educate themselves through the experience of the lockdown by reflecting on and learning

² <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoft-365/blog/2020/04/30/2-years-digital-transformation-2-months/>

³ Jeanne Ross's keynote speech "Digitized is not Digital: Architecting Two Simultaneous Transformations" at the IRM UK Enterprise Architecture & Business Process Management Conference Europe, October 21–24, 2019, London.

⁴ <https://www.cbs.dk/en/research/departments-and-centres/departments-of-strategy-and-innovation/research/virtual-leadership-corona-crisis>

about where, what, and who within their companies actually created value for customers. Consequently, they used this knowledge to develop new methods of value creation focused on accruing rents through the value generated by organizational human capital rather than by decreasing the costs of those resources for the organization (Chadwick, 2017). The focus on the duality of digital allowed these companies to emerge stronger and more prepared for future crises, helped them build long-term resilience, and increased speed to market, workforce productivity, and stability (BCG, 2020). As the role of HR in this process has yet to be explored, I offer the following guideline:

Guideline 2. In order to understand the effects of the disruption brought about by the rise of digital technology and formulate a response to that disruption, future theoretical and empirical work in HRM should explore the processes, drivers, and consequences of the duality of digital, which refers to the need to introduce fundamental changes in how HR delivers business value while digitally transforming the core.

A good starting point for such work is the literature on e-HRM. Bondarouk, Parry, and Furtmueller (2017) reviewed four decades of research on adaptation and the consequences of e-HRM. They concluded that, in most cases, e-HRM delivers on its promise of improving efficiency: “unquestionably, e-HRM has the potential to simplify and enrich; steer and support; and shorten and speed up the pursuit of organizational and employee goal accomplishment” (Bondarouk et al., 2017, p. 114). However, although this stream of literature provides plenty of evidence on the “digital face-lifting” of HR, we still have no knowledge of how HR handles or, even better, leads true digital (not just digitized) transformations. HR practitioners need research-based evidence on how HR reinvents its organizational value proposition and switches its focus from employees to customers because digital technologies make doing so possible.

2.3. AI and machine learning

For HR as a function, the rise of digital technologies involves a myriad of factors—first and foremost are data and analytics, but artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, robotics, and automation are also prominent (Meijerink, Boons, Keegan, & Marler, 2018). As Angrave et al. (2016, p. 9) conclude, HR as a function lags “behind other functional areas of management in the adoption of analytics technology and in the analysis of big data.” The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic confirms this, as few companies seem to have recognized the relevance of HR analytics for handling the crisis. For example, Nokia’s analytics function mapped its entire workforce-demographics data against the COVID-19 data from Johns Hopkins University’s CSSE to create a regularly updated, interactive map that could provide decision-makers with critical information about the workforce at a desirable level of granularity. Yet, in the majority of the cases, HR analytics projects have been pushed into the background, as the analytics function is simply not perceived as “business critical” in relation to handling the crisis. The crisis has drawn a clear line between those companies that recognize the value of people analytics (i.e., because it is rational) and those that only invested in analytics because everyone was doing so (i.e., because it is fashionable) (Minbaeva, 2017).

Overall, analytics poses major challenges for HR, including challenges associated with data quality and data integration. HR practitioners generally lack key analytical competencies, ranging from the ability to ask business-relevant research questions to the ability to build and run analytical models. The function needs some big-time upskilling (Huselid & Minbaeva, 2019). Like everyone else, HR specialists will have to engage in life-long learning if they are to retain their jobs, and achieve fulfilling and rewarding careers. For HR, preparing for the “future of work” means becoming data literate, acquiring data-analytics competencies, becoming “consumers of analytics,” and acting as “boundary spanners” and change agents when implementing the results of analytics projects (Minbaeva, 2017, 2018).

Notably, analytics can interrupt the way that systems usually work, prevent those systems from continuing, and even do harm to the organization. In other words, analytics can serve as a disruptor. Analytics is merely a tool—like a hammer, it can be used for constructive and destructive purposes. Consider the example of IBM. The company introduced an algorithm that used points to evaluate workers’ performance. The more points an employee received, the more protected that employee was from the risk of termination (www.reddit.com). However, the algorithm was poorly constructed—it gave more points to employees who were relatively new to the job. In other words, employees who had worked for IBM for only a few years received more points than those who had been there longer. As a result, those with no points had worked for IBM for an average of 30 years, while those with the most points had an average tenure of 15 years. The points did not reflect employees’ skills. Notably, 80% of the more experienced, older workers were evaluated by the company itself as ‘good enough to stay at current job levels or be promoted.’ However, the results of the algorithm suggested that 20,000 older workers are to be pushed into early retirement, voluntary resignation, or termination of employment. As Angrave et al. (2016, p. 7) suggest, “unless analytics is embedded in a full and comprehensive analytical model, the more limited information available in a dashboard formats may be misinterpreted by ... managers with a limited patience for or understanding of HR.”

Similar arguments have been raised in relation to the introduction of machine learning and AI. A recent review by Raisch and Krakowski (2020) points out that the uncritical application of AI in organizations may negatively affect managerial practice. In particular, they identify paradoxical tensions between augmentation and automation, and argue that overemphasizing one of the two will have negative organizational and societal outcomes. AI-based automation is a choice driven by arguments regarding rationality and efficiency. If automation is overemphasized, “the whole industry may be ‘entering in a race towards the zero-margin reality of commoditized work’ (Davenport & Kirby, 2016: 204)” (Raisch & Krakowski, 2020, p. 17). Augmentation, on the other hand, is “a co-evolutionary process during which humans learn from machines and machines learn from humans” (Raisch & Krakowski, 2020, p. 10). Although the type and extent of human involvement may vary, a human expert serves as the starting point for machine learning in most cases. Unlike humans, computers lack judgement skills. Therefore, interactions between machines and humans are based on the

assumptions introduced by humans. Those assumptions may be incomplete, biased, or not evident. In other words, “continued human involvement implies that human biases persist, which means augmentation outcomes are never fully consistent, reliable, or persistent” (Raisch & Krakowski, 2020, p. 18). This is why an overemphasis on augmentation efforts often fails. In response, organizations escalate their commitments, which leads to continued failure. In sum, the uncritical, one-sided application of either automation or augmentation creates vicious cycles, and triggers unintended organizational and societal consequences.

What can HRM researchers do to help HR professionals deal with the disruption brought about by digital technologies? HRM researchers need to help HR professionals avoid the traps associated with digital technologies. For example, in response to the promise of AI and machine learning, many organizations revamped their talent strategies and refocused on hiring data scientists. This created and then accelerated a talent gap for data scientists, resulting in hundreds of unfilled positions and difficulties in competing with tech start-ups for talent. However, this gap is only temporary, as advances in machine learning mean that the tasks handled by data scientists will become automated. What remains relevant in the era of automated machine learning are competencies related to understanding the business challenges, translating those challenges into mathematical terms, and deploying the results of the new models into existing business processes (McKinsey, 2020). These are the augmentation challenges. Actively addressing these challenges will not only give organizational HR “street credit” but also strengthen its organizational legitimacy and offer it an opportunity to become a true leader of business transformations.

Relatedly, there is a potential for a paradigm shift that we have rarely discussed in HRM research. It relates to the very definition of HRM as a field of inquiry into the processes of “developing, applying and evaluating policies, procedures, methods and programs relating to the individual in the organization” (Miner & Crane, 1995: 5). With the arrival of digital technologies, focusing on individuals alone may be too limited. We need to consider broadening our scope to the interfaces between machines and individuals by balancing automation and augmentation strategies. This leads to a third guideline:

Guideline 3. In order to understand the effects of the disruption brought about by digital technologies, such as analytics, AI, and machine learning, and formulate a response to that disruption, future empirical work in HRM should address how digital technologies (via balanced automation and augmentation) can support HR in building legitimacy in their organizations.

For this line of research, I echo Angrave et al.’s (2016, p. 8) statement that “academics do have an important role to play.” This role relates to more than education—academics can also contribute through their rigorous knowledge of research process and model building. They can also help carefully examine the assumptions behind models, and match research questions, data, and analytical methods in relation to the introduction of AI. Moreover, academics can point to the paradoxical tensions, and help organizations accept them and formulate strategies to address them (Raisch & Krakowski, 2020). However, to be able to do so, academics need to become both “bilingual interpreters” for practitioners and active collaborators. As Gulati (2007, p. 781) suggests, “an extension of our role can be to co-create knowledge with the managers whose behavior we study.”

This requires a fundamental shift in the way we do research in HRM. Researchers cannot turn to organizations only when they need data, gather as much data as possible, and then lock themselves in their offices with a note on the door that reads “Do Not Disturb—Running STATA.” Researchers must stay with practitioners throughout the research process, starting with the search for an interesting question. Through such collaboration, academics can show practitioners that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951, p. 169) and learn that “there is nothing so theoretical as good practice” (Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019, p. 493).

3. A way forward: HR transformation

As a profession, HR is facing several disruptions and there are good reasons why we, as HR professionals (both academics and practitioners), should pay attention and rewrite the rules. The development of HRM as a field of research and as a field of practice has shown that incremental fine-tuning is insufficient (Kaufman, 2012; Ulrich & Dulebon, 2015). In 2007, in his famous blog post “Why We Hate HR,” Keith Hammonds (www.fastcompany.com) concluded: “After close to 20 years of hopeful rhetoric about becoming ‘strategic partners’ with a ‘seat at the table’ where the business decisions that matter are made, most human-resources professionals aren’t nearly there. They have no seat, and the table is locked inside a conference room to which they have no key.” Today, HR finally has the key and is seated at the table, but everyone else has left the room (Cappelli & Tavis, 2017). As sporadic changes and mega-trends are coming from outside the organization, strategy development no longer occurs in the conference room. It occurs in close proximity to customers, outside the organization’s permanent structures, and with a new perception of temporality. HR is still sitting inside the building, imprisoned in the cell of supportive functions created by Porter’s value chain, chained to the wheel of annual processes, and blinded by the self-imposed role of strategy implementer. What will it take to get HR in the driver’s seat?

To answer this question, I rephrase a statement made by Jeffrey Immelt (2017): HR must be profoundly convinced that it must transform itself, and that doing so is a matter of life or death. HR professionals need to put themselves at the strategic inflection point—the point where “fundamentals are about to change. That change can mean an opportunity to rise to new heights. But it may just as likely signal the beginning of the end” (Grove, 1996, p.3). From that point, doing things better, cheaper, quicker, and smarter (i. e., continuous improvement) will lead HR towards “the beginning of the end.” Rising to new heights will require HR professionals to do things differently. We can start by throwing out the wheel of annual HR processes, and continue by drawing a circle and placing the customer at the center. We must answer the key question: How do we create value for the customer through human capital? If HR managers cannot find the answer, they need to push themselves even further into the inflection point.

The same applies to researchers, who must also put themselves at the inflection point. What do we need to do differently? What rules should we rewrite? We do not need new theories in HR. Instead, we need to revisit the theories that form the core of HR as a research field and, perhaps, revise some of their assumptions that we have happily taken for granted for years—assumptions that have

already been challenged, if not disrupted, by changes in business models, the rise of digital technologies, and new type of workforce. Above, I identified at least three dogmatic assumptions that maintain the research-practice gap: the assumption of a coupling among time, place, and tasks (permanent organizations); the assumption of an outcome variable (performance); and the assumption of a need to solely focus on the individuals (isolated from the digital context). I believe that letting go of these assumptions will create an interesting research agenda for the near future.

Author statement

This is a single-author paper. All work was done by the author.

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