

Examining the Dynamics of HRM Accountability: Analyzing the Relationship Between Decentralization, Devolution, and HR Department Power in Multi-Unit Organizations

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Abstract

This study explores the connection between decentralization and devolution in Human Resource Management (HRM) and helps to explain two terms that are often used interchangeably. Devolution is the delegation of HRM responsibilities from HR professionals to line managers, while decentralization is the authority to implement HRM policies from the head office to local organizational units. The study uses data from the Cranet survey and employs multilevel analysis to test this relationship and the moderating effect of HR department power. The result indicates that decentralization of HRM is positively related to devolution to line managers. But this positive correlation decreases when the HR function has greater influence within the organization, suggesting that stronger HR functions are more likely to retain policy decisions. By highlighting departmental power as a crucial boundary condition and offering more precise conceptual and operational differences between the two procedures, the study advances HRM theory. The results indicate that, in practice, the location of HRM authority needs to be intertwined with the actors involved in policy-making.

Keywords: *HRM function, HRM department, HRM decentralization, Devolution, Line managers, HRM power*

JEL Classification: *C12, J24, M12, M16, M54*

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are increasingly adopting flexible operating models and greater collective responsibility to respond to changing environments. This need is evident in human resource management because of developments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work, and changing labor markets. Organizations have therefore moved toward both decentralizing HRM policies and delegating HRM functions to line management. Although empirical investigations

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reveal various patterns of centralized control and devolution, the direct relationship between these processes has received little attention (Hoogendoorn & Brewster, 1992; Adekoya et al., 2022; Kostova et al., 2016; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022; Ferner et al., 2004; Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Hoogendoorn & Brewster, 1992; Holt Larsen & Brewster, 2003). The exclusion may be due to the ambiguity surrounding the concepts of decentralization and devolution in human resource management (HRM). HRM duties can be decentralized or devolved; decentralization refers to the geographical distribution of HRM functions between headquarters and local units, whilst devolution refers to the body within the firm that is responsible.

Although this distinction is important to Hoogendoorn and Brewster's original definitions (1992), the conceptual divergence between the two conceptions has received substantially less scholarly attention over the last three decades. The terms devolution and decentralization of the HRM function are used interchangeably, which illustrates the confusion. However, they instead relate to HRM decentralization, which refers to decision-making at either the subsidiary or headquarters level. According to Lodenstein and Dao (2011), devolution is a form of decentralization in public administration, whereas decentralization encompasses devolution, deconcentration, and delegation (Feizy et al., 2015). (Hoogendoorn & Brewster, 1992; Mesner Andolšek & Štebe, 2005; Davis & Luiz, 2015; Lodenstein & Dao, 2011; Feizy et al., 2015). Recent research further supports this distinction and highlights the rise of empirical research on the impact of HRM decentralization on organizational performance and governance structures (Smith et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2025; Lee & Park, 2024).

Kurdi-Nakra et al. (2022) attempted to distinguish between HRM devolution and decentralization by examining differences from the perspective of power retention, but this does not clarify the definitions of the concepts. While researchers may give a strong conceptualization and operationalization of these phenomena in their studies, the nomenclature used might occasionally obscure their distinction. While Reichel and Lazarova (2013) explore greater centralization of decisions within the HRM department and further devolution within the organization, Nachmias et al. (2022) emphasize the necessity of decentralizing HR practices to the line (Intindola et al., 2017; Mayrhofer et al., 2019).

This study seeks to explain the distinction between decentralization and devolution in human resource management and to provide operational definitions of both concepts. Decentralization and devolution are two distinct phenomena that do not always occur concurrently. In cases where organizations shift HRM functions from a central headquarters to regional subsidiaries or other minor operating units, there should be designated officials to supervise these decentralized functions. Such appointments typically include line managers at the subsidiary level, where decentralization and devolution may occur concurrently or, conversely, in reverse. At the local level within the HRM department, it is not related to decentralization. Examining the relationship between the two constructs is the study project's secondary objective. Although Hoogendoorn and Brewster (1992) did not conduct an empirical investigation of the relationship between these variables, they presented descriptive statistics on various forms of HRM decentralization and devolution. Therefore, there are still some unanswered concerns about how easy or difficult it is to promote HRM decentralization. The theoretical premise that organizational design choices and uncertainty management are related forms the basis of the

hypothesis analysis (Donaldson, 2001). We concentrate on one specific antecedent that may affect as many border conditions as possible: the authority granted to the HRM department (Hickson et al., 1971).

The focus on this dimension is based on the inherently political character of decision-making power (Nguyen et al., 2019), which is not limited to efficiency issues but affects the level of HRM decentralization and devolution in organizations. It is especially critical in any decision-making process concerning devolution because the HRM department must participate. Human resource managers act as agents in allocating various HRM tasks in collaboration with top management. Consequently, HR managers assume the role of decision-makers concerning the degree of devolution inside the organization. The extent of devolution within the organization will directly affect the HRM department.

This study contributes to the HRM canon by specifying the conceptual and operational differences between decentralization and devolution, analyzing how they relate to one another in multi-unit organizations, and examining how departmental power affects them. This research aims to elucidate the distinct contrasts between decentralization and devolution in the context of Human Resource Management (HRM). The phenomena are analyzed, starting with the phenomena themselves, followed by the individual definitions, as in this section.

(De)centralization

Centralization and decentralization in Human Resource Management (HRM) are frequently linked in contemporary literature, particularly in the context of multinational corporations and, recently, shared human resource management services (Maatman and Meijerink, 2017). This notion is based on a body of academic research on organizational design that emphasizes the structural organization of divisions. As a result, tied to the point of decision-making and policy-making. Typically, centralization refers to concentrating business operations by concentrating decision-making authority at headquarters, which is thought to be better informed about all business processes standardized in local units (Kim et al. 2003). Centralization primarily aims to impose managerial control over local units by establishing an organizational hierarchy to ensure compliance with business strategy (Smale et al., 2013). Decentralization distributes decision-making authority throughout the organization's divisions and lower levels of the hierarchy (Mills et al., 1990), ceding control for enhanced flexibility and Efficient decision-making (Cray, 1984). Centralization offers advantages such as economies of scope and size, standardization of HRM services, a cohesive global identity, internal equity, and enhanced efficiency, as well as the dissemination of best practices and strategic alignment. Decentralizing human resource management provides advantages, including greater flexibility, faster response times, and improved responsiveness to requirements.

Devolution

Strategic HRM has attracted considerable attention in the academic world since its inception, and the diffusion of certain HRM functions to line managers has also drawn considerable attention in the research arena. Over the following decades, the momentum behind devolution grew in response to the trend of downsizing, restructuring, and privatization at the beginning of the 90s, which necessitated increased operational fluidity and responsiveness (Intindola et al., 2017). Centralization primarily aims to impose managerial control over local units by

establishing an organizational hierarchy to ensure compliance with business strategy (Smale et al., 2013). The literature on devolution clearly concludes that all levels of management have a strong substantive effect on HRM practices (Kehoe and Han, 2020).

At first glance, this may appear to be a self-evident concept, as managers are commonly viewed as translators of the signals delivered by HRM policies. In this context, line managers are the pivotal individuals responsible for implementing HRM procedures across various functional domains, including training, employee selection, and performance evaluation. A significant portion of devolution research focuses solely on line managers' responsibility for implementing HRM policies and practices (Townsend et al., 2022a), neglecting their involvement in other HRM duties, such as formulating HR policies. The studies have acknowledged the enhanced active involvement of line managers, elucidating their extensive role in Human Resource Management, as articulated by Kim and Kehoe (2022) and Bos-Nehles et al. (2017), while highlighting the multitude of responsibilities they assume. The subsequent two studies seek to elucidate this issue, presenting a continuum: one delineates a gradual approach, while the other establishes the degree of accountability assigned to line managers.

Cascón-Pereira and Valverde (2014) conducted experiments to discern the distinctions among the delegation activities, and secondly, identified 3 categories of HRM delivery practices exhibited by line managers: implementation (the execution phase of HRM delivery behaviour in the prior model), translation (decision-making authority in the previous model), and adaptation/introduction (when line managers assume complete responsibility for executing an HRM practice from its inception). The devolution of Human Resource Management (HRM) is often described as allocating HRM responsibilities across several hierarchical levels, as illustrated in the aforementioned example; however, it is essential to examine these layers to understand the relationship between devolution and decentralization in HRM. This article aims to delineate the decision-making landscape of HRM policy, identify the key decision-makers, and elucidate the role of HRM in this context.

Empirical objective

Empirical research on the relationship between devolution and decentralization requires selecting a specific level of analysis. This implies that the responsibilities related to HRM policy decision-making are under question rather than HRM strategy or the performance of HRM activities in operations, which are not generally addressed in the existing literature. The decision-making level of the policy should be analyzed to identify the persons and bodies responsible for the HRM policy. This empirical study delves at five distinct aspects of human resource management: compensation and benefits, hiring and selection, education and training, labour relations, and growth or contraction of the workforce, when a company decentralises and allocates decision-making authority for recruitment and selection, line managers in proximal business units or subsidiaries are empowered to assess the requirement and timing of recruiting the number of hires, the choice between internal or external candidates, and the recruitment methods to be employed. Contrary to this, in an organisation where no delegation of authority is allowed and policy decisions related to compensation and benefits are centralised, the design of its reward system, including pay scales for each job occupation, employee categories who are eligible to receive performance-based remuneration, and type of benefits which is to be offered to the employees will be left to the HRM department of the

corporate head office. Decentralization and devolution of human resource management exhibit differing levels of focus; both pertain to decision-making.

The division duties and decision-making power (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995) and the organizational structure (which relates to the level of decentralization or centralization) (Ghoshal and Nohria, 1989) are two distinct elements. This implies that issues pertaining to organizational design should be taken into account in any attempt to comprehend how these processes interact. Theories that preceded this study suggested that the structural differences are related to the level of task unpredictability and interrelation Donaldson, 2001. Burns and Stalker (1961) argued that devolved organizational designs can't be separated among organizations that face uncertainty as a by-product of market processes or technological changes. The standardized operational procedures imposed at higher levels in the hierarchy can be relatively easily applied in the context of low uncertainty and thus result in highly specialized, delineated roles, typical of the mechanistic structure, according to their thesis. Conversely, during periods of heightened uncertainty, operations must rely on the initiative of employees with a comprehensive understanding of their responsibilities (Donaldson, 2015).

This need aligns with broader organic shapes, where dynamism and organizational flexibility are primary. Global HRM research indicates that while decentralization of HRM services is associated with greater organizational flexibility, the environmental complexity of subsidiaries is associated with a decrease in that flexibility. Corporate organizations are forced to live with uncertainty, and when the environment in which they operate is different from that of the parent, they have to adapt. Decentralization facilitates the more effective fulfillment of local requirements. Decentralized organizations have less task specialization and formalization, which improves the unit. This reduction in formalization leads to a decrease in the number of established HRM rules and processes (Donaldson, 2001), hence diminishing the necessity for a specialized HRM department and increasing the responsibilities of line managers. They deal with employees on a daily basis and have access to relevant information and resources; line managers are highly competent in making timely and effective human resource management decisions (McCracken et al., 2017).

In general, organizations that operate in uncertain environments and must adapt to changing business conditions should consider decentralizing HRM activities from the head office to business units and to line managers, thereby encouraging individual dependence and the involvement of people directly involved in the local business. A centralized HRM, on the other hand, results in organizations that rely less on local managers. Given the aforementioned considerations, the prediction is that:

H1. larger degrees of HRM decentralisation will result in larger levels of devolution to line managers.

HRM Department Power

Decentralized Human Resource Management may make line managers more reliant on decision-making inside the HRM framework. There are, however, other ways of decentralizing HRM that do not involve the HRM department. Larsen and Brewster (2003) describe having a local HRM structure and function in the form of HRM professionals or HRM business partners. The power differential between the HRM department and other organizational

units will affect the relationship between HRM decentralization and devolution, as well as aspects of organizational design and uncertainty management. The strategic function of the Human Resources Management (HRM) department has always been linked to its authority within the firm. An HRM department that takes on a strategic role demands more respect and influence than one that simply does administrative duties. The strategic posture of the HRM department is influenced by two primary factors: first, HRM's membership in the Second, the top management team actively participates in the development of business strategy (Brewster et al., 2015; Gooderham et al., 2015).

In the aforementioned setting, the problem and activities regarding HRM decentralization and devolution are crucial. This study investigates the decision-making process for HRM policy and shows that delegating HRM functions can have benefits and drawbacks, which may be advantageous when the HRM department hands over policy and administration to line management (Sheehan, 2005). This will allow the line manager to focus on the strategic imperatives, thereby increasing the scope of influence. However, Modern political viewpoints can provide new perspectives on the work of human resource management (HRM) departments. For instance, the perceived complexity or specialization of HRM issues determines the extent of delegation to professionals and thus affects HRM's internal position, which depends on intra-organizational power relations (Hickson et al., 1971).

The decision-making process on HRM matters may be delegated to professionals to varying degrees, depending on perceptions of the complexity or specialization of HRM issues, which in turn impact intra-organizational power relations. The idea of equality in knowledge and competence is common in HRM departments. In contrast, if line managers lack HRM competence, the HRM department will gain more influence; therefore, only HRM experts have the necessary abilities to carry out HRM tasks. Thus, HRM departments were also likely to exercise control over HRM decision-making, even though the same authority was decentralized to local units, particularly those with power. Dominating departments will be more likely to maintain stronger HRM knowledge and intrinsic value, and to keep HRM competencies in-house rather than outsource HRM decision-making to line departments. Over time, HRM employees have become the legal, ethical, and conventional owners of the HRM role (McCracken et al., 2017) and thus have become less willing to have others do the job they feel is theirs (Perry and Kulik, 2008). Consequently, we assert that:

H2. HRM department power will negatively moderate the relationship between HRM decentralization and devolution, so that this association will be weaker for high levels of HRM department power.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Figures used in this analysis come from the Cranet research project, a global endeavor that collects data on human resource management procedures for employees across multiple countries (Parry et al., 2021). Cranet is not a survey that seeks opinions but rather collects objectively measurable data (neutral practices, figures); the likelihood of a socially desirable response is lower (Chang et al., 2010). The survey utilized a key-informant approach within each organization, necessitating that the respondent be the highest-ranking HRM employee or

a representative, thereby ensuring optimal access to pertinent information (Parry et al., 2021). To determine the sample for this study, companies without a dedicated HRM department were excluded because it would be difficult to rate devolution in such companies. Along the same lines, organizations operating as single units were not included because the study was limited to multi-unit organizations to assess the degree of decentralization of HRM decision-making at both the headquarters and local levels. This enabled the attainment of a total sample size of 4,652 firms across 35 countries.

Measures

Current research indicates that the metrics employed for the primary phenomenon of study—decentralization in Human Resource Management (HRM)—refer to the decision-making hierarchy in the design of HRM policy, rather than to the operational activities at lower-level roles within HRM.

The key constructs of the study were developed and operationalized using the Cranet standardized survey instruments, which have been used in a wide range of cross-national HRM research and have been validated in prior empirical studies. This gives the theoretical and methodological consistency in construct measurement.

Devolution

The five domains of human resource management responsibilities were used to assess levels of devolution: salary and benefits, recruiting and selection, training and development, industrial relations, and staff expansion/reduction. Responses were classified as follows: 1 - HRM department only, 2 - HRM department in partnership with line management, 3 - line management independently in cooperation with HRM department, and 4 - line management independently. The results for the five domains of HRM activities have been combined to form a holistic index, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of devolution. This is consistent with the conclusions of Gooderham et al. (2015) and Reichel and Lazarova (2013). Decentralization of HRM has been tested, as Lazarova et al. (2017) did, using an overall score that included key factors affecting HRM policies, including compensation and recruitment. These may be at International & National Headquarters, at subsidiaries/Departments/Divisions, or at locations/Establishments/Local Offices. This approach yields a total score across the different domains, interpreted as a grade of HRM decentralization, with higher scores reflecting greater decentralization.

Devolution, in theory, is supported by HRM devolution theory and decentralization frameworks, which describe the delegation of HR decision-making authority from HR departments to lines of authority at different organizational levels.

HR power

Authority was operationalized in accordance with the HRM department's strategic orientation (Reichel and Lazarova, 2013), using three criteria to assess its influence. A single individual responsible for HRM-related matters on the Board was classified as a binary variable (1 = present, 0 = absent). We also determined whether the senior manager of Human Resource Management was among the initial individuals involved in developing the business strategy (1 = yes, 0 = no) and whether the performance of the personnel/human resources function/

department was assessed (1 = yes, 0 = no). The aggregate score ranged from 0 to 3. The construct is based on strategic HRM theory, which characterizes HR power as the degree of HR's involvement in strategic decision-making and corporate governance.

Control variables

The measured size of the organization is the log of the number of employees (Mesner-AndolVsek and SVtebe, 2005), and how it is compared with the existing knowledge of how it may be impacting the structure of HRM (Brewster et al., 2015). According to Johnston and Menguc (2007), HRM requires more skilled and experienced staff in larger organizations, with the idea that a larger HRM team corresponds to more complex HRM policies and a reduced need for devolved power (Reichel & Lazarova, 2013). Third, industry classification was encoded as a binary indicator, based on the idea that there is a separation between service industries coded as 1, and manufacturing sectors coded as 0 (Gooderham et al., 2015). We categorized the company as multinational (1) or national (0) and as engaged in overseas operations (1) or mostly domestic activity (0). The organization's operational duration was subjected to a natural logarithm transformation. We classified the company as global (1) or national (0), and as operating internationally (1) or primarily domestically (0). The organization's age was calculated using the natural logarithm of the number of years it has been in operation.

The use of Cranet standardized survey instruments, which have been shown to be valid and reliable in several peer-reviewed HRM studies, supports the constructs' reliability and validity. The use of consistent measurement items for every country provides construct reliability; the cross-national design and the structure of the questionnaire, developed by experts, provide validity.

RESULTS

The information supporting the current study has a hierarchical structure in which individual organizations are embedded within their respective nations. To this end, SPSS (Version 27; Peterson et al., 2012), the study's hypotheses were tested utilizing multilevel analytic methods. Level 1 organizational variables were mean-centered at the group level (Enders, 2007, p. 2) to accurately assess heterogeneity in slopes and intercepts and to make them more interpretable. The result and predictor variables originated from a single entity, potentially indicating a common technique and decreasing the possibility of bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As a precaution, we analyzed Harman's single-factor test, which revealed that the initial unrotated factor explained 13.78% of the variance among all measurement variables, well below the 50% threshold, suggesting that common method bias is not an issue in our study.

Furthermore, variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostics and model specification tests were conducted to make sure that the regression estimates were robust. Table 1 presents a correlation matrix. The independent and control variables exhibited no collinearity. The variance inflation factors (VIFs) were all less than 2, well below the customary criterion of 10 (Cohen et al., 2002). The multilevel analysis results have been summarized in Table 2. The null model was first estimated, consisting only of the intercepts, with all predictors excluded. According to the hierarchical model, the factor variance (2.18) explains the variation in the change of devolution across countries, and the residual variance (10.05) explains the remaining variation within

countries ($p < 0.001$), showing that 17.8% overall variance in devolution may be attributable to inter-country variances, thereby confirming the multilevel analysis. This intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) also supports the need for multilevel modeling, given substantial between-country variation.

There is a statistically significant negative relationship between the dimensional features of organizations and those of the human resource management (HRM) department, implying that when organizations and/or the HRM department grow in size, the degree of devolution diminishes. In contrast, multinational corporations showed a positive relationship: they tend to devolve human resource management to line managers compared to domestic companies. The effect showed the same trend throughout the analysis. The present model exhibited a superior fit relative to the null model, as evidenced by a decrease in the maximum likelihood estimation statistic (-2LL). Furthermore, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) were used as formal goodness-of-fit metrics. The systematic reductions in both criteria were due to the addition of explanatory variables, reflecting increasing model adequacy. These successive improvements in AIC and BIC consistently indicate greater model parsimony and strength.

The link between HRM decentralization and devolution needs to be examined using country-specific regression specifications to identify the points of intersection of the derived equations. Model 2 included HRM decentralization as the main predictor, along with the control variables from this perspective. Statistically significant and positive predictive relationships between the variables mentioned were indicated by the regression coefficients. In addition, due to the lower value of $-2LL$, a significant enhancement in model fit was observed compared to Model 1. This represents an improvement and a better fit between the variation in results at both the organizational and national levels and the model. Hypothesis 1 is therefore validated. Coefficients in the model estimates are similarly significant across all nested models, further supporting the stability of the estimates.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Devolution	11.87 (3.45)	1					
2	Organization Size	3625 (20450)	-0.061**	1				
3	HR Department Size	49 (410)	0.028*	0.007	1			
4	Organization Age	92 (230)	-0.041**	0.519***	-0.015	1		
5	Decentralization	8.27 (3.21)	0.124***	-0.054**	0.006	-0.021	1	
6	Power of HR Function	1.62 (1.04)	-0.239***	0.075**	0.014	0.052***	-0.116***	1

Note(s): * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Fixed Effects	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	11.75 (0.28)***	13.29 (0.36)***	13.01 (0.24)***	12.68 (0.26)***	12.66 (0.41)***
Organization Size		-0.621 (0.11)***	-0.541 (0.12)***	-0.404 (0.13)***	-0.401 (0.12)***
HR Department Size		-1.04 (0.17)***	-0.936 (0.20)***	-0.845 (0.20)***	-0.841 (0.20)***
Multinational Status		0.483 (0.12)***	0.462 (0.14)***	0.408 (0.14)***	0.403 (0.14)***
Industry Type		0.074 (0.12)	0.018 (0.13)	0.041 (0.14)	0.044 (0.14)

Organization Age		0.002 (0.13)	0.002 (0.15)	0.001 (0.15)	0.001 (0.02)
Decentralization			0.052 (0.02)**	0.049 (0.02)**	0.051 (0.02)**
HR Power				-0.417 (0.07)***	-0.418 (0.03)***
Decentralization × HR Power				-0.051 (0.02)**	
Random Effects	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intraclass Correlation (ICC)	0.174	0.149	0.147	0.154	0.153
Between-Firm Variance (σ^2)	10.12 (0.22)***	8.91 (0.23)***	8.95 (0.26)***	8.72 (0.26)***	8.69 (0.26)***
Between-Country Variance (σ^2)	2.25 (0.52)***	1.54 (0.39)***	1.57 (0.40)***	1.65 (0.41)***	1.63 (0.42)***
Fit Statistics	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
BIC	22,981.44	18,117.20	13,033.12	12,594.70	12,592.41
AIC	22,968.75	18,104.38	13,021.23	12,582.61	12,580.02
-2LL	22,964.75	18,100.38	13,017.22	12,578.61	12,576.02

Note(s): * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

BIC: Bayesian information criterion; AIC: Akaike information criterion

Source(s): Created by authors

The second hypothesis (H2) posits that a correlation exists between HRM devolution and decentralization, mediated by the authority of the Human Resource Management (HRM) department. Model 4 results indicate the comprehensive impact of the HR Department's decentralization role. The effect is adverse and statistically significant, hence corroborating Hypothesis 2. This validates the statistically meaningful direction of the moderation effect of HR power on the relationship between decentralization and devolution. The performance capabilities of Model 4 were improved compared to earlier models, as delegating HRM policy decisions to line management may be perceived as a threat to the HRM department's internal standing. Finally, we have identified a positive correlation between higher levels of HRM devolution and greater devolution, although this link is less pronounced in more powerful HRM departments. The moderation pattern is as expected in theory, demonstrating that HR power weakens the decentralization–devolution relationship.

DISCUSSION

The present study contributes to the literature on human resource management (HRM) by clarifying two closely related yet distinct organizational phenomena: HRM decentralization and HRM devolution. This study adopts the definitions of HRM devolution as the transfer of HRM responsibilities from HR specialists to line managers, and HRM decentralization as the geographical dispersion of HRM policy authority from headquarters to local organizational units, as recommended by Hoogendoorn and Brewster (1992). These operational definitions give a better sense of the difference between the two and will serve as a framework for future academic investigations. In addition, the definitions are quite extensive and cover a wide range of HRM activities from administrative and operational to strategic and policy.

A major objective of this study was to examine the relationship between HRM decentralization and HRM devolution through the lens of organizational design theory and decision-making

structures. Drawing on Donaldson's (2001) contingency perspective, it was hypothesized that organizations adopting a decentralized approach to HRM policy decision-making would be more likely to devolve HRM responsibilities to line managers. The findings from a multilevel analysis of 4,652 organizations across 35 countries support this assumption, revealing a positive relationship between the two variables. Organizations that grant local units greater autonomy in HRM policy development are also more likely to involve line managers in HR-related decision-making processes. This finding reinforces the argument that decentralized structures facilitate greater participation by operational managers in people management activities.

One of the major aims of this research was to explore the relationship between HRM decentralization and HRM devolution in the context of organizational design theory and organizational decision-making structures. Based on Donaldson's (2001) contingency view, it was hypothesized that organizations with a decentralized organizational structure (with regard to HRM policy decision-making) would be more likely to decentralize HRM decision-making to line managers. This assumption was confirmed by the results of a multilevel analysis of 4,652 organizations across 35 countries, which showed a positive relationship between the two variables. Those that allow local units greater autonomy in developing HRM policies are also more likely to include line managers in HR decision-making processes. This discovery strengthens the case for decentralized structures to allow more involvement of operational managers in people management.

The study also supports Burns and Stalker's (1961) theory of organizational design, which argues that a decentralized organizational structure promotes delegation and decision-making. But the results indicate that there is no single relationship between decentralization and devolution, and that the authority and power of the HRM department have a significant influence on them. There is a tendency in such organizations towards centralizing HRM decisions within HR rather than making them part of line managers' responsibility. This is consistent with earlier studies showing that strong HR departments tend to centralize HR specialists and are less likely to delegate to line managers or external HR service providers.

Interestingly, the results cast doubt on one of the key assumptions of strategic HRM literature that HR specialists willingly delegate activities to line managers so they can concentrate on strategic activities. Rather, the results have shown HR departments' resistance to surrendering policy-making authority, which is connected to issues of professional influence, organizational power, and control over HRM processes. If line managers are given a heavy role in HRM decision-making, HR may be limited to an administrative or service role within the organization, thereby constraining its strategic role. The results underscore the need to account for internal politics and power relations when analyzing HRM architecture and organizational design.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that HRM decentralization and HRM devolution are interrelated yet different aspects of organizational design. Decentralization concerns the geographical location of authority for making HRM policies, whereas devolution involves delegating HRM responsibilities from HR specialists to line managers. The data from 4,652 organizations in 35 countries show that the more autonomous HRM is in local policy-making, the more HRM decisions are made by line managers. But the influence and authority of HR can put this into perspective, as they may wish to retain policy decision-making.

The results support the theory of organizational design and HRM by emphasizing the role of internal power relationships in determining HRM structures. The study emphasizes that HRM centralization, decentralization, and devolution are not only structural issues but also political and strategic ones. The real problem for practitioners is to devise the right mix of centralization, local sensitivity, managerial control, and organizational flexibility. The clear definition of HRM decision-making roles and responsibilities allows organizations to build a more resilient, effective, and strategically oriented HRM system.

Limitations of the Study

This study has some limitations. Firstly, measures of HRM decentralization and HRM devolution were created as composite measures using HRM subfunctions (five). As a result, the analysis might be incomplete in capturing the differences within each HRM activity, including recruitment, performance management, compensation, training, and employee relations. Future studies should be conducted on each of these dimensions in its own right to get a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena.

Secondly, cross-sectional data are gathered from the Cranet survey, and the analysis is largely based on the views of senior HR practitioners. Consequently, the results might be more indicative of organizational policies than of what is actually done at lower levels in the organization. Also, respondents may be subject to response bias, and findings may not be comprehensive from a single respondent source.

Thirdly, the study fails to recognize the institutional, legal, and cultural variations across the countries in which it is conducted, which might also impact HRM decentralization and devolution. Since it is a sample of 35 countries, contextual factors may have a strong impact on organizational decisions regarding HRM structures. In addition, the quantitative assessments used in the study fail to distinguish between HR specialists and line managers and do not fully capture the quality of the relationships among HR professionals and line managers, or among senior, middle, and frontline managers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should focus on HRM decentralization and devolution across specific HRM functions to determine whether different patterns exist across HR activities. Researchers should use additional multi-level and multi-informant approaches involving HR professionals, line managers, employees, and senior executives. This would provide broader insight into the organization and the distribution and implementation of HRM functions.

Longitudinal research designs are also suggested for studying changes in HRM decentralization and devolution over time and their responses to changes in organizational strategy, technology, and the external environment. Moreover, future research should examine the influence of institutional, cultural, and regulatory environments on HRM arrangements in various countries. The processes of negotiating, delegating, and sharing HRM authority among organizational actors could be illuminated through qualitative research methods such as case studies and interviews.

Researchers also need to use the most precise terminology when discussing HRM structures. Don't confuse the terms "centralization" and "devolution." However, scholars need to be explicit about what they mean when discussing the geographical location of HRM authority, the delegation of HRM responsibilities, or both. The greater the conceptual precision the more likely it is that there will be theoretical development and the ability to make meaningful comparisons between studies.

Practical Implications

The results of this study are significant for senior executives, HR professionals, and organizational decision makers involved in designing HRM structures. The results indicate that two important and interrelated decisions need to be carefully made: Where to place HRM authority geographically and who to make HRM decisions. These dimensions can be clearly defined to help strengthen accountability, increase transparency, and provide consistency in people management practices at the organizational level. The results also reveal that delegating HR decision-making responsibilities directly affects the organization's governance, specifically with respect to control, coordination, and unit-level strategic alignment.

Centralized HRM organizational arrangements may involve a significant amount of HR knowledge and expertise in the HR headquarters to develop HR policies and ensure organizational unity in locations. On the other hand, decentralized structures require more investment in developing the HR competencies of local managers, since they are increasingly involved in implementing and adapting HR policies. The study also proposes that the HRM structure should align with strategic goals, local operational requirements, and the preferred levels of control and flexibility. Organizations can minimize ambiguities and create more effective HRM systems by clearly defining decision rights and responsibilities.

Also, the combination of centralization and decentralization can be balanced to achieve strategic consistency and local responsiveness, especially in complex, multi-unit organizations.

The findings also indicate that HR departments have an important strategic role in HR policy design, decision-making, and organizational performance outcomes.

The results highlight the need for mechanisms to coordinate the actions of multinational organizations to move different geographic units towards alignment, while allowing adequate flexibility to address local markets.

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