

Configurational Model

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Configurational models are perhaps one of the most comprehensive, but also complex ways of examining HRM. A configurational model provides a holistic overview of the HRM system, examining how a pattern of multiple independent variables (e.g. various bundles of HR practices) are related to a given dependent variable (e.g. employee performance). In technical terms a configuration model refers to 'any multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristic that commonly occur together' (Meyer et al., 1993, p. 1175). This holistic basis of inquiry makes configuration models distinct from universal approaches that examine simple and direct relationships. Configurational models adopt the logic of equifinality, i.e., that there are multiple, equally effective ways of meeting the same desired outcome. Configurational models therefore propose a systems-based analysis that captures both the intended objective and the various means of achieving that objective. As a result, configurational approaches typically propose typologies or ideal types.

One of the most influential configurational models in HRM comes from the work of Miles and Snow (1984), who suggested a number of organisational strategies (analyser, defender, prospector, reactor) and the various HR configurations likely to be aligned with each. For example a prospector strategy founded on innovation is likely to require sophisticated, skill-based recruitment, results-orientated performance and external competitiveness in terms of compensation. In contrast an organisation pursuing a defender strategy in a stable market might develop talent internally and have a more process-orientated performance appraisal and hierarchical-based compensation. Configurational models stress both vertical and horizontal alignment, with an ideal configuration being one that maximizes the degree of internal fit and consistency in the HRM system.

The systems-based approach provided for by configurational analysis is useful as it captures all dimensions of the business and HRM system. However, this holistic focus and non-linear logic also makes configurational models more difficult to apply so that they are frequently conceptually evoked, but less often empirically examined (Boon, Den Hartog, & Lepak, 2019). The stress on patterns of unique factors also suggests that configurations may very well emerge and form over a period of time. The recurrent dilemma faced by configurational approaches is that 'while they come closest to modelling the complexity of organisations, they must stop short for analytical manageability' (Colbert, 2004, p. 346). Advocates of configurational theory argue that the purpose is to present ideal states as opposed to empirical realities and that these in turn have proved useful tools to encourage conversation and self-reflection among HR practitioners. More advanced techniques including fuzzy cluster set analysis and qualitative comparative analysis may well offer methodological pathways to better accommodate configurational logic and get to grips with complex causality (Furnari et al., 2021).

See also:

Context; Contingency theory; Strategic HRM; Universalistic theory.

References and selected further readings

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Brian Harney