

# Strategic human resource practice implementation: The critical role of line management



David M. Sikora <sup>a,\*</sup>, Gerald R. Ferris <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Management, Orfalea College of Business, California Polytechnic State University, 1 Grand Ave, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Management, College of Business, Florida State University, 821 Academic Way, P.O. Box 3061110, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1110, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Human resource practices  
Line managers  
HR practice implementation  
Social context theory  
Organizational culture  
Turnover intention  
Job performance  
Job satisfaction  
Procedural justice

## ABSTRACT

The implementation of effective human resource (HR) practices typically rests with line managers. This paper uses social context theory to propose that line manager HR implementation is influenced by organizational culture, climate, and political considerations. Subsequently, HR implementation is anticipated to drive employee outcomes. This model's implications and future research directions also are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Effective human resource (HR) practices can greatly improve a firm's operational and financial performance. Effective HR practice use (which includes practices such as the use of employment tests, linking compensation to job performance, employee attitude surveys, and formal employee communication programs) drives numerous firm performance improvements, including improved productivity, lower employee turnover, greater sales growth, and higher profits (Huselid, 1995). Consistent with these findings, other researchers described similar results showing that the use of these "high performance" HR practices is associated with improvements in firm financial and operational performance (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Delery & Doty, 1996; Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, & Allen, 2005).

Despite these benefits, many organizations do not consistently use these HR practices (Hornsby & Kuratko, 2003). First, in some situations, HR policies described in detail by senior managers, actually may exist only on paper (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Storey, 1992). In these cases, the organization's HR practices may be outdated, poorly understood within the firm, and/or represent a poor fit with the organization's operating culture.

Next, while in most firms, the human resources department is responsible for the development of effective HR practices, the implementation of those practices ultimately falls to the firm's line managers (i.e., the firm's operating managers, including positions such as customer service, sales, quality and/or manufacturing managers). As a result, firms may attempt to use effective HR practices, but find that their line managers vary in the extent to which they consistently implement the practices (Van Iddekinge et al., 2009). Similarly, Wright, McMahan, Snell, and Gerhart (2001) noted that many firms fail to meet top performance levels because line managers failed to implement the HR practices developed by the organization's HR function.

Gratton and Truss (2003) described the key components of an effective employee management strategy. Their model included three dimensions. The first component was based on an alignment between people strategy and business goals. The second

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [dsikora@calpoly.edu](mailto:dsikora@calpoly.edu) (D.M. Sikora), [gferris@cob.fsu.edu](mailto:gferris@cob.fsu.edu) (G.R. Ferris).

component involved an alignment across individual HR policies. The final component in their model focused on HR practice implementation. In this model, HR implementation represented the degree to which HR practices are put into effect by an organization's line managers and employees.

The importance of successful HR implementation was demonstrated in a number of research efforts. In a multi-year study with a variety of firms, [Gratton and Truss \(2003\)](#) confirmed that HR implementation appears to be fundamental to successful employee management and, in turn, to improved firm performance. [Becker and Huselid \(2006\)](#) also acknowledged the importance of HR implementation in driving firm performance. They proposed that while much is known about the relationship between HR practices and improved firm performance, more should be done to examine the crucial role of HR practice implementation in driving these outcomes.

[Huselid, Jackson, and Schuler \(1997\)](#) also examined the firm performance impact of HR practice implementation. In their paper, the authors made the distinction between technical (i.e., HR practices such as benefits, compensation, and safety) and strategic (i.e., HR practices such as employee empowerment, management development, and teamwork) HR implementation. Their findings highlighted how most firms more effectively implemented technical HR practices rather than strategic HR practices. However, the authors noted that the firm performance returns (i.e., sales growth, employee productivity, and gross rate of return) for effectively implementing the strategic, rather than technical, HR practices were much higher.

Similarly, other HR scholars also stressed the importance of better understanding potential mediating linkages in the HR–firm performance relationship model. For example, [Ferris et al. \(1998\)](#) proposed a variety of social factors impacting HR implementation efforts, and possibly mediating the HR–organization effectiveness relationship. [Bowen and Ostroff \(2004\)](#) likewise argued that in trying to better understand how HR practices shape firm performance outcomes, more comprehensive HR–firm performance models should examine possible intermediate linkages such as HR implementation.

To help explore these HR practice implementation issues in greater detail, this paper proposes a model of HR implementation which suggests that line managers' use of effective HR practices is influenced by a variety of social context factors including social interactions, organizational culture, organizational climate, and political considerations. It is anticipated that these factors combine to influence line management ability and/or willingness to execute their organization's HR practices, and ultimately influence critical employee outcomes such as turnover intent, job satisfaction, job performance, and procedural justice perceptions.

## 2. Line managers and human resource implementation

While the HR department typically develops each organization's HR practices, line managers are usually responsible for the implementation of such practices. Consequently, well-designed HR practices may be poorly or inconsistently implemented by the firm's line managers. For example, [Leicester \(1989\)](#) found that line managers often fail to take responsibility for employee development. Additionally, they noted that many of the line managers they studied believe interpersonal skills training to be unnecessary. [Fenton-O'Creedy \(2001\)](#) similarly determined that middle management resistance often results in lower employee involvement outcomes in many organizations. Finally, [Harris \(2001\)](#) noted that low line manager involvement often is a weak link in the implementation of performance management systems.

Similarly, in some cases, line managers may ignore or sabotage HR practices as acts of resistance or to simply further their own agendas (e.g., favoring one employee over another because of friendship rather than merit). For example, [Analoui \(1995\)](#) described numerous forms of line manager counterproductive and sabotage behaviors used to express workplace discontent. These behaviors included the major categories of inaction, waste, and destruction. Within these categories, manager indiscipline, disruptive workplace practices, and non-cooperation were all seen.

In contrast to these negative findings, other studies have noted that many line managers believe that their HR responsibilities are important, and work to implement their organization's HR practices in a quality manner. For instance, [Currie and Procter \(2001\)](#) remarked that line managers often play an important role as strategic change contributors. [Wright et al. \(2001\)](#) stated that line managers frequently believe that employee attraction, selection, retention, and motivation are critical to their firm's success. These managers also believed that effective HR service delivery is integral to their firm's competitive advantage. [Renwick \(2003\)](#) investigated line managers' HR views across multiple organizations, and noted that these managers were willing to handle their HR responsibilities, and took a professional attitude towards their employees.

These contrasting HR implementation findings point to a key issue — line managers' role in implementing their organization's human resource practices. While numerous studies have focused on assessing the impact of HR practices on firms' financial and operational performance ([Becker & Gerhart, 1996](#); [Delery & Doty, 1996](#); [Huselid, 1995](#); [Wright et al., 2005](#)), fewer studies have examined how line managers actually implement their firm's HR practices.

In the limited work in this area, researchers noted the importance of line managers in effectively implementing their organization's HR practices. For example, [Boxall \(1996\)](#) noted that while knowledge of HR practices may be widespread throughout an organization, managers' knowledge of how to effectively implement them may not be. Other HR scholars discussed how line managers serve as interpretive filters of HR practices. As a result, when managers visibly implement HR practices, they can promote common employee interpretations and positively impact organizational culture and climate ([Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989](#); [Naumann & Bennett, 2000](#)). [Bowen and Ostroff \(2004\)](#) argued that when managers implement HR practices in a consistent and coordinated manner, then those practices are more likely to have a mutually-reinforcing impact on organizational outcomes. Finally, in contrast to these positive HR implementation outcomes, [Ferris et al. \(1998\)](#) noted the potential downside to manager's weak or ineffective HR implementation efforts. They argued that managers' poor HR implementation efforts likely result in unfavorable employee attitudes.

Each of these examples highlights the role that social context factors play in line managers' HR implementation efforts. As a result, social context seems to be a significant matter that should be addressed when discussing HR implementation. Although line managers make a variety of individual HR implementation decisions, those decisions are also likely affected by a variety of higher-level social context factors. In this view, HR success is impacted by a variety of contextual factors including top management HR support, line managers' beliefs about the importance of people, and the involvement of both HR professionals and line managers in the strategic planning process (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

### 3. Theoretical foundations and proposition development

#### 3.1. Proposed model

The “best” HR practices have little performance impact if line managers can't, or choose not to, implement them. For example, line managers may not have the ability to effectively implement their organization's HR practices (i.e., a lack of performance appraisal training may result in poor performance appraisal implementation). Additionally, managers may not have the motivation to implement HR practices effectively (i.e., few or no incentives to do so, or the desire to achieve other job objectives). As a result, in carrying out their employee management responsibilities, each line manager makes a series of decisions regarding the implementation of their organization's HR practices. These choices determine whether they implement a small or large percentage of these practices. When making these implementation decisions, line managers are influenced by a variety of social context factors.

Ferris and colleagues described social context as encompassing an organization's social interactions, organizational culture, climate, and politics (Ferris et al., 1998). These social context factors are issues that are shaped and determined by higher-level groups within the organization, and/or the firm itself (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ferris et al., 1998; Sikora & Ferris, 2011). In this social context model, the attitudes, beliefs, values, and political issues that shape organizational culture and climate also drive the development of HR policies and practices. Similarly, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) highlighted how higher-order social structures such as organizational culture and climate shape HR practices. In turn, the resulting HR practices serve to influence both individual and firm performance.

In this paper's proposed model, social interactions including organizational culture, climate and political considerations are expected to influence line managers' HR practice implementation levels. Collectively, these social interaction factors influence managers' HR implementation decisions and behaviors. When line managers' perceive these factors as valuing HR practices, and/or offering political value, their resulting HR implementation efforts should also be greater. Conversely, if managers believe that these social interaction factors don't value HR practices, or offer little political value, then subsequent HR implementation levels are also likely to be lower (Sikora & Ferris, 2011).

In this model, line manager HR practice implementation level represents the percentage of their organization's HR practices that are implemented by each manager. When managers consistently choose to use many of their organization's HR practices, their HR implementation level is high. Conversely, when a manager chooses to ignore or uses only a few of their organization's HR practices, then their HR implementation level is low. Additionally, in this proposed model, line manager HR implementation level is crucial because it mediates the relationship between line manager HR implementation factors and subordinate employee outcomes.

These employee outcomes include important organizational consequences such as employee turnover intention, job performance, job satisfaction, and procedural justice perceptions. Employee turnover intention represents subordinates' intentions to leave the organization within the next twelve months. Job performance is subordinates' perceptions of their ability to meet their job requirements and responsibilities. Job satisfaction is also an important employee outcome. In this model, job satisfaction characterizes employees' overall job contentment and enjoyment. Subordinate procedural justice perceptions are the final employee outcome in this proposed model. This outcome focuses on employee's perceptions of their organization's decision-making process and their involvement in that process. When employees believe that the decision-making process is consistent and fair, combined with their sense of involvement in that process, then their procedural justice perceptions will also be high.

Collectively, this HR implementation model proposes that social interaction factors positively impact line manager HR implementation levels. Subsequently, HR implementation levels likely impact a series of critical subordinate outcomes. As a result, this model helps assess and potentially demonstrate the key mediating role of HR implementation in the HR–firm performance relationship as proposed by many HR scholars (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook, & Frink, 1999).

Although beyond the scope of this paper, this proposed HR implementation model also could include linkages from these employee outcomes to many business and strategic outcomes. For example, numerous researchers proposed that more positive employee outcomes are related to improved firm performance results. Ferris et al. (1998) suggested that employee attitudes and behaviors directly impact organizational financial outcomes such as return on assets, profitability, and/or stock price growth. Other SHRM researchers demonstrated this strategic link between employee outcomes and financial performance. These studies highlighted the association between the use of HR practices, improved employee outcomes and better financial results (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Delery & Doty, 1996; Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1996; Wright et al., 2005).

#### 3.2. Theoretical development

The primary theoretical framework for this proposed model is Ferris et al.'s (1998) conceptualization of social context theory in human resource systems. Social context theory suggests that an organization's social context, including its culture, climate, political considerations, and social interactions, shapes the linkages between HR systems, HR practice implementation, and

organization effectiveness. This social context model also proposes that the types of HR practices that are developed and implemented in each organization are shaped by these key social factors (Ferris et al., 1998).

In the social context model, organizational culture is defined by an organization's deeply shared attitudes, norms, beliefs, core values, and assumptions. Since these characteristics are shared consistently across the organization, they strongly influence the firm's governing systems and resulting member behavior (Ferris et al., 1998; Hatch, 1993). For example, if a high level of HR practice implementation is a strongly held organizational value, its line managers are more likely to consistently use those practices. In contrast, if organizational norms hold that employee management is a low priority, then managers may be less apt to implement their firm's HR practices.

An organization's climate, while similar to organizational culture, can be thought of as employees' more short-term and changeable understanding of their environment (Denison, 1996). Similar to organizational culture, climate can also influence line managers' views regarding HR practice importance and implementation. For instance, if line managers view some HR practices as a short-lived management goal or whim, then social context theory suggests that they may be less likely to implement those practices. Similarly, if an organization's climate strongly reflects short-term rewards and/or punishments, then social context theory predicts that line managers likely will act in more self-interested ways. As a result, managers in these situations are liable to only use their organization's HR practices when it benefits them, or when there are punishments associated with not adhering to the practices.

An organization's social interactions and political considerations are also important components of the social context model. For example, Mintzberg (1985) proposed that organizations are essentially "political arenas" in which social interactions such as coalition building, power wielding, positioning, and competing interests decide what gets accomplished. These political characteristics also help shape an organization's culture.

Political considerations can also help explain disconnects between culture and HR practice design and implementation. Johns (1993) argued that HR practices often are adopted due to organizational politics, federal regulations or environmental threats, and less often from organizational need. As a result, line managers might be threatened by certain politically-inspired HR practices and resist their consistent use.

Overall, social context theory provides a strong conceptual foundation for understanding and anticipating line managers' HR implementation decisions and behaviors. The social context model highlights how an organization's values, beliefs, attitudes, and political issues shape HR practice development and implementation (Ferris et al., 1998). As a result, if line managers' norms primarily focus on production goals at the expense of other management practices, then managers may choose not to implement their firm's HR practices. Similarly, if line managers believe that their organization's culture is one in which effective employee management isn't valued, they also may be less likely to implement their organization's HR practices.

### 3.3. Propositions

In this paper's proposed model, social context factors play an important role in line managers' HR practice implementation and execution. These factors can include an organizational culture supportive of HR practices and an organizational climate emphasizing HR implementation goals and rewards. Additionally, these contextual factors also can include political considerations emphasizing greater HR accountability, and/or social interactions improving HR/line manager relationship quality.

#### 3.3.1. Antecedents of implementation

An organization's prevailing norms and values shape its organizational culture. The sum of these norms and values helps determine line managers' actions and behaviors (Sikora & Ferris, 2011). For example, Ajzen (1991) proposed that an organization's norms are a key determinant of managers' behavior. In this view, organizational norms supporting the use of the firm's HR practices are likely to increase managers' implementation behaviors. Conversely, norms devaluing HR practices are likely to decrease HR implementation efforts.

Pfeffer (1996) noted that organizational culture and politics sometimes create change-resistant organizations that don't value the use of effective employee management practices. In Pfeffer's view, these social pressures may result in line managers disregarding essential HR practices generally associated with improved firm performance. van der Zee, Bakker, and Bakker (2002) similarly found that a firm's social pressures may be responsible for the limited use of effective employee selection practices. Finally, Cassell, Nadin, Gray, and Clegg (2002) determined that an organization's HR norms had a significant influence on line managers' HR implementation decisions and behaviors.

In contrast, gaining line managers' HR commitment requires strong organizational values emphasizing the basics of employee management (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2003). Likewise, Heraty and Morley (1995) stated that organizational support is critical for improving line manager acceptance of HR responsibilities. Finally, Watson, Maxwell, and Farquharson (2007) argued that a key influence on line managers' HR behaviors is the degree to which they believe that HR is considered important by their firm.

These findings support the view that organizational culture is key to line manager HR implementation activities. When the culture's norms and attitudes are supportive of HR practice use, then line management HR implementation efforts also should increase.

**Proposition 1.** *An organizational culture supportive of effective human resource practices is positively associated with higher line manager HR implementation levels.*

Organizational culture is defined by an organization's enduring and deeply shared attitudes, norms, and beliefs. In comparison, organizational climate is individuals' more short-term and variable environmental interpretation (Denison, 1996; Ferris et al.,

1998; Kopelman, Brief, & Guzzo, 1990). Kopelman et al. (1990) argued that organizational climate includes an organization's key goals, work means and methods, task and social support provided to employees, and the type of rewards provided for good job performance. Similarly, Schneider (1990, p. 384) described climate as employees' "perceptions of the events, practices, and procedures and the kinds of behaviors that are rewarded, supported, and expected in a setting."

Klein and Sorra (1996) described how the effectiveness of innovation climates (i.e., the consistency and quality of organizational members' use of an innovation) is a function of the strength of the organization's implementation-focused climate for that innovation, along with how well an innovation fits with each user's values. Their model specified a variety of implementation outcomes (i.e., including resistance, avoidance, compliance, and commitment). Bowen and Ostroff (2004) further exemplified the characteristics of an implementation-focused climate. They discussed the relationship between goals and rewards by stating that if an organization has a goal of customer service and employees value financial gain, then service-based bonuses will increase employee relevance and allow both individuals and organization to achieve their goals.

Thus it appears that organizational and personal performance incentives likely will influence line managers' HR implementation efforts. Few HR implementation performance incentives will likely decrease line managers' HR implementation levels, while a greater number of these incentives should improve their implementation efforts. Examples of this type of implementation-focused performance incentives include line manager raises and bonuses being linked to the use of their organizations' HR practices, managers being recognized for the effective implementation of various HR practices, and/or managers being selected for promotion or coveted special assignments based on their HR implementation activities.

Two studies demonstrated this link between performance incentives and line managers' HR implementation actions. In the first study, McGovern, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles, and Truss (1997) noted that line manager HR implementation was impacted by the use of performance incentives. Their study found that managers' low willingness to implement their organization's HR practices can result from a lack of either individual and/or organizational incentives. Similarly, Watson et al. (2007) asserted that an organizational culture that includes rewards and recognition encourages line managers' achievement of their HR responsibilities.

These studies clearly point to a link between an organizational climate emphasizing performance goals, incentives and rewards, and line managers' implementation efforts. Accordingly, it follows that an organizational climate emphasizing HR implementation goals and rewards should increase line manager HR implementation efforts. In contrast, when the climate doesn't value or reward HR implementation, then line managers' implementation activities will likely be lower.

**Proposition 2.** *An implementation-focused organizational climate emphasizing human resource implementation goals and rewards is positively associated with higher line manager HR implementation levels.*

Ferris et al. (1998) described the impact of political considerations on HR practice development and implementation. They argued that politics can have either a positive or negative impact on organizations. For example, political considerations might contribute to the flexibility or inflexibility of an organization's HR practices, and line managers' subsequent HR implementation efforts. In this view, political activities can help an organization by resolving conflicting interests and/or by making sense of the complex organizational systems, policies, and procedures (Lucas, 1987). In contrast, political behaviors such as coalition formation, lobbying, withholding information, and controlling agendas also can hurt organizations. These behavior types were shown to restrict information flow, create communication barriers, and lead to poor organizational performance (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988).

Accountability can be viewed as a political behavior. For example, for political reasons, some managers may be held more or less accountable than others. In a similar way, if some managers believe that accountability is a valued senior management norm in their firm, they may welcome being answerable for their responsibilities. Thus, organizational political considerations can also include emphasizing greater HR accountability from line managers. Greater HR accountability appears likely to increase line managers' attention to HR implementation. On the contrary, due to their high workload demands, managers not answerable for HR performance are more likely to let those priorities slip. As a result, HR implementation is likely to be impacted by political considerations such as line manager accountability levels.

For example, Renwick (2000) found that while many line managers welcome HR responsibilities, this responsibility needs to be accompanied with greater accountability. Renwick also argued that responsibility and accountability are key factors in the execution of line managers' HR duties. Accountability also was identified as an HR implementation issue by Cassell et al.'s (2002) study of small business line managers. These managers felt that while they were accountable for implementing their organization's HR practices, they also believed that there was no formal evaluation of HR practice success. Renwick (2003) similarly found that line managers believed that they were increasingly assuming HR responsibilities and accountability, yet they were given little authority in carrying out those duties. Finally, Watson et al. (2007) asserted that clearly defined accountability for HR tasks is crucial for line managers' HR practice execution.

As demonstrated by these studies, it appears that line manager accountability is key to HR implementation. When senior managers in an organization value accountability for the firm's HR practices, then politically-astute managers appear more likely to implement those practices. However, due to the volume of line managers' typical work responsibilities, if their organizations don't hold them accountable for implementing HR practices, then it appears likely that line managers' HR implementation efforts may decrease.

**Proposition 3.** *Organizational political considerations emphasizing greater human resource practice accountability are positively associated with higher line manager HR implementation levels.*

The quality of social interactions between the HR department and line managers also appear to play an important role in HR implementation. Social interactions capable of improving this relationship are thus likely to impact HR implementation efforts.

When the HR/line management relationship is strong, line managers are likely to have more trust in the HR function, place more value on HR's recommendations, and work with HR to more fully implement their HR duties. In contrast, if line manager attitudes towards the HR department are poor, then working together is less likely. When this happens, HR implementation also should decline.

For example, [Torrington and Hall \(1996\)](#) found that HR strategy is primarily executed through an HR/line management partnership. As a result, trust between the HR department and line managers is an important HR practice enabler ([Garavan, Barnicle, & Heraty, 1993](#)). Similarly, [Whittaker and Marchington's \(2003\)](#) study focusing on line managers' HR views illustrated that line managers see HR support as crucial to their performance and that a partnership with HR is beneficial to their role.

[Renwick's \(2003\)](#) research examined the tensions between HR and line management over the transfer of HR duties to the line. This research revealed that when line managers assumed greater HR responsibilities, they expect some level of HR function reciprocity. However, in many circumstances this didn't occur, resulting in lower HR/line manager relationship quality. Renwick also noted that line managers' felt that while they were increasingly responsible for HR tasks, there was often little HR department flexibility or appreciation for their efforts. As a result, social interactions that improve HR/line management relationship quality appear likely to greatly influence line manager HR implementation behaviors. When social interactions characterizing the HR/line management relationship are strong, line manager HR implementation efforts should increase. If these interactions and the HR/line relationship are weak, then HR implementation efforts will likely decrease.

**Proposition 4.** *Social interactions improving HR/line manager relationship quality are positively associated with higher line manager HR implementation levels.*

### 3.3.2. Consequences of implementation

Line managers' HR implementation levels likely impact employee outcomes. These include critical outcomes such as subordinate turnover intention, job performance, job satisfaction, and procedural justice perceptions. When line managers implement more of their organization's HR practices, subordinate outcomes are expected to improve. In this view, HR practices are proposed to create multiple, mutually-reinforcing conditions that support employee outcomes such as motivation and skill acquisition ([MacDuffie, 1995](#)).

Social context theory ([Ferris et al., 1998](#)) provides a strong foundation for better understanding of a variety of subordinate outcomes resulting from line managers' HR implementation efforts. This theory proposes that organizational climate impacts the development and implementation of an organization's HR systems and practices. These HR systems and practices then influence the organization's short-term climate. Together, organizational culture, HR systems and practices, and organizational climate subsequently shape employee attitudes. These attitudes then strongly influence employee behaviors. Finally, these behaviors help determine organizational effectiveness levels.

Numerous studies provide support for this social context view of HR practices and their positive association with a variety of employee and firm performance outcomes. These outcomes include lower employee turnover ([Huselid, 1995](#)), higher motivation ([MacDuffie, 1995](#)), and more positive employee attitudes ([Macky & Boxall, 2008](#)). As proposed by social context theory, these subordinate outcomes are subsequently associated with improved firm performance outcomes including higher sales and greater profits ([Huselid, 1995](#); [MacDuffie, 1995](#)).

Accordingly, HR practices, and the level to which those practices are implemented by an organization's line managers, are likely to have a strong impact on subordinates' employee turnover intentions. [Huselid \(1995\)](#) found that HR practices are linked to reduced employee turnover and increased employee productivity. Similarly, [Richard and Johnson \(2001\)](#) found that HR practice effectiveness significantly reduces turnover. Finally, [Macky and Boxall \(2008\)](#) found that an organization's use of HR practices increases employees' intentions to remain employed with their organizations.

These findings demonstrate the key role that HR practices likely play in shaping subordinates' turnover intentions. HR practices can impact subordinate turnover intention through their influence on issues such as employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, procedural justice perceptions, and/or job performance. In turn, each of these issues directly influence turnover intentions. Consequently, line managers' HR implementation levels seem likely to impact subordinate's turnover intention. When HR implementation levels are high, employee turnover intention should be reduced. Conversely, when HR implementation levels are low, employee turnover intention likely will rise.

**Proposition 5.** *A higher line manager human resource practice implementation level is negatively associated with subordinate turnover intention.*

Line managers' HR implementation levels also appear to influence subordinate job performance. [Huselid \(1995\)](#) and [MacDuffie \(1995\)](#) both found that HR practices are associated with greater employee productivity. [Evans and Davis \(2005\)](#) demonstrated that HR practices improve employee communication and cooperation among employees. Similarly, [Delery and Shaw \(2001\)](#) found that HR practices help improve employees' job knowledge, skills, and abilities, which can then lead to improved job performance. Together, these studies suggest that HR practices, and the implementation level of those practices, can shape many employee activities which play a key role in determining subordinate job performance. When an organization's HR practices are implemented at a high level, subordinate's job performance should subsequently improve. When those HR practices are implemented at a low level, employees' job performance will likely decrease.

**Proposition 6.** A higher line manager human resource practice implementation level is positively associated with subordinate job performance.

Macky and Boxall (2008) examined the relationship between HR practices and employee attitudes. They found that HR practices typically have an additive, positive relationship with employee work attitudes such as job satisfaction, trust in management, and psychological identification with their organizations. Similarly, Becker, Huselid, Pickus, and Spratt (1997) showed that an organizations' HR practices help increase employee job satisfaction and facilitate better employee decision making and improved productivity. HR practices also are linked to improved performance measures such as job satisfaction and employee turnover (Dyer & Reeves, 1995).

These results again demonstrate that HR practices are associated with key employee outcomes such as higher job satisfaction. When line managers implement more of their organization's HR practices, subordinates' job satisfaction levels should increase. Conversely, when line managers implement fewer of their organization's HR practices, subordinates' job satisfaction is likely to fall.

**Proposition 7.** A higher line manager human resource practice implementation level is positively associated with subordinate job satisfaction.

HR practices also seem likely to influence employees' procedural justice perceptions. HR practices that demonstrate employee investment and provide employee recognition signal that the organization is supportive of its employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). These practices show employees that the organization seeks to build ongoing relationships with them. Accordingly, when employees perceive that their organization offers and implements effective HR practices, they also are likely to believe that the organization is more professional, consistent, fair, and just.

This view is supported in a number of studies. Allen, Shore, and Griffeth (2003) found that HR practices are significantly correlated with organizational commitment and perceived organizational support. In this study, supportive HR practices increased employees' organizational attachment because employees perceived that the organization supported and cared about them. Similarly, Shore and Shore (1995) suggested that employees' perceptions that their organization offered HR practices are positively related to perceived organizational support and perceived procedural justice. Rhoades, Eisenberger, and Armeli (2001) also found that HR practices and perceived organizational support are associated with perceptions of supervisory support, organizational rewards, and procedural justice. Accordingly, it appears that greater HR practices and implementation levels lead to increased employee procedural justice perceptions. Alternatively, if HR implementation levels are low, then subordinate procedural justice perceptions also will likely be decreased.

**Proposition 8.** A higher line manager human resource practice implementation level is positively associated with subordinate procedural justice perceptions.

### 3.4. HR practice implementation level as a mediator

This study's proposed model (see Fig. 1) suggests that line manager HR implementation levels mediate the relationships between line manager implementation factors and key subordinate outcomes. It is expected that when HR implementation factors such as an organization's culture, climate, political considerations and/or social interactions are supportive of effective

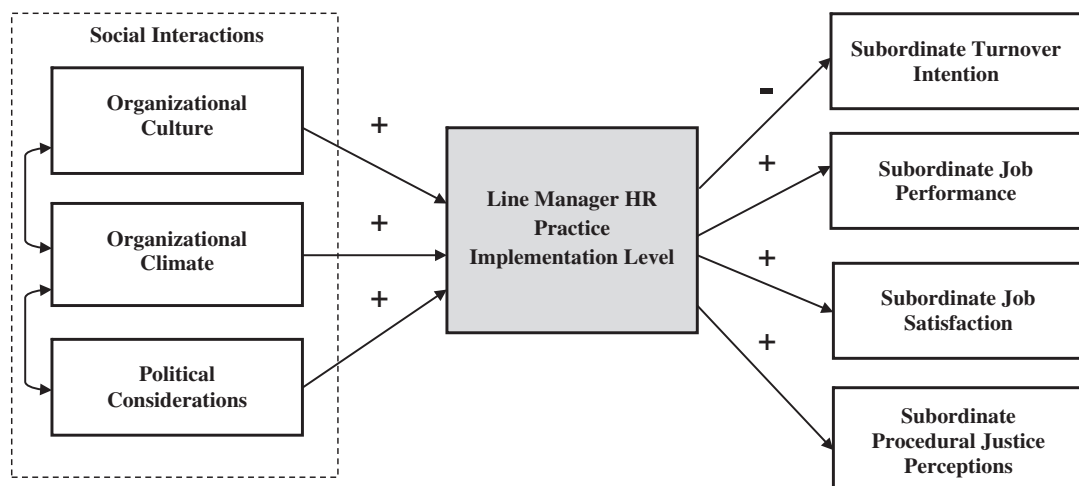


Fig. 1. A model of human resource practice implementation.

employee management practices, then HR implementations levels also will be high. In turn, higher line management HR implementation levels are anticipated to be associated with lower subordinate turnover intention, and higher subordinate job performance, job satisfaction, and procedural justice perception levels.

**Proposition 9.** *Line manager human resource practice implementation level mediates the relationships between organizational culture, organizational climate, political considerations, and social interactions, and subordinate turnover intention, job performance, job satisfaction and procedural justice perceptions.*

#### 4. Discussion

Becker and Huselid (2006) maintained that a better description of the implementation step (i.e., the “black box”) between HR and firm performance is a critical challenge in Strategic HR Management research. This paper intended to address that need, and as a result, there are a number of issues for further discussion.

##### 4.1. Contributions and implications

This paper's proposed line manager HR implementation model provides better insight into the factors potentially influencing line managers' HR practice implementation efforts, and the resulting employee outcomes. The testing and substantiation of these propositions should provide a more complete HR implementation model. This HR implementation model points to the importance of social context factors in shaping line managers' HR implementation levels, and the resulting impact on key subordinate outcomes. The HR implementation model proposed in this paper offers a deeper understanding of the important contextual issues impacting managers' implementation efforts, and in turn, important employee and firm performance outcomes.

Next, substantiation of this proposed model should contribute to theory by extending support for social context theory to the HR implementation domain. The social context model of HR systems suggests that HR implementation is influenced by an organization's values, beliefs, attitudes, and political considerations (Ferris et al., 1998). Subsequently, in this model, the implementation of an organization's HR practices and programs is associated with critical employee and organizational performance outcomes. Empirical support for this paper's proposed model will further validate this social context view of HR systems.

Finally, support for this proposed model will help address Becker and Huselid's (2006) call to further examine the potential mediating role of HR implementation in the HR–firm performance relationship. Additional exploration of this possible intermediate link between HR practices and firm performance is likely to highlight the importance of line management efforts in shaping critical employee and/or firm performance outcomes.

##### 4.2. Directions for future research

Future research should be conducted to thoroughly test this paper's propositions. Assuming that support is found for the HR implementation model proposed in this paper, a new set of research opportunities arise. These opportunities fall into four categories. First, as described in this paper, are questions related to organization-level predictors of HR implementation. Next, are research questions involving individual-level factors of HR implementation. Additionally, there are research opportunities focusing on employee and firm performance outcomes resulting from HR implementation. Finally, there are methodological issues related HR implementation research that should be addressed in greater detail.

There are additional research opportunities that should be examined besides the possible organization-level predictors described in this paper. These include deeper questions around organizational culture and climate. For example, are certain organizational cultures better predictors of line managers' HR implementation level? Perhaps cultures which balance the attainment of business results with high employee trust and respect levels also have higher line manager HR implementation levels. Conversely, primarily results-driven cultures may inhibit HR implementation levels.

Expanding upon culture and climate's impact on HR implementation, researchers also could examine the impact of organizational incentives on implementation efforts. Do line managers handle their HR implementation responsibilities differently when organizations have a greater number of implementation-focused performance incentives? If so, which incentives appear to have the greatest influence on implementation activities?

An additional organizational-level HR implementation issue involves how HR practices are implemented across complex multi-unit and/or multi-culture firms. Depending on which unit of these organizations is examined, HR implementation might look very different. For instance, HR practices, and the implementation of those practices, might vary considerably based on industry, business strategy, job-type, level of the business, etc. As a result, “alignment” with these organizational characteristics also could be an important part of future research efforts focused on effective HR implementation.

In addition to organization-level research opportunities, there also are a number of individual-level research questions. For instance, do line managers' individual political skill levels impact HR implementation levels? As described in this paper, organization-level political considerations are likely to be associated with HR implementation levels, however, individual political skill levels may also be a useful predictor of HR implementation. Additionally, potential individual-level predictors such as line



managers' capacity to take on additional responsibilities, their HR competency levels, and/or their motivation levels also may be useful predictors of HR implementation levels (Sikora & Ferris, 2011). These factors should each be examined in greater detail.

Next, the potential relationship between HR implementation levels and employee and firm performance outcomes should be assessed in more detail. In addition to testing the employee outcomes proposed in this paper, the relationship between HR implementation level and firm performance outcomes can also be assessed. Does line manager HR implementation level directly impact firm performance outcomes (such as sales growth, profit growth, and/or employee productivity), or does it indirectly impact firm performance through the employee outcomes proposed in this paper? Additional research should be done to test the actual characteristics of this potential relationship.

Finally, there are important methodological issues related to HR implementation research that should be addressed in greater detail. HR implementation level measurement is a key issue for future research. Sikora and Ferris (2011) measured HR implementation level by examining the degree to which line managers implemented their organization's HR practices. However, beyond the *level* of HR implementation, there also are questions regarding the *effectiveness* of HR implementation. The level and effectiveness of line managers' HR implementation activities may be very different things. For example, many firms track the percentage of employees who receive a performance appraisal each year. However, this quantitative HR implementation measure doesn't necessarily say anything about the quality or effectiveness of those appraisals.

As a result, perhaps HR implementation measures should include both level and effectiveness measures. If so, how will HR implementation effectiveness be defined and measured? In a related issue, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) also discussed the need to include both line manager and employee measures of HR implementation and "HRM strength." Clearly, HR implementation measures are in their infancy, and require additional research efforts.

Additionally, perhaps it is worth considering how HR implementation varies by HR practice type. All HR practices may not be equal in either their implementation ease, or their firm performance impact. For example, the implementation ease and firm performance impact of a firm's compensation system likely is very different than for effective employee coaching. Perhaps these differences might account for important variance in HR practice implementation. Consequently, HR implementation measures also might take into account these between and within HR practice issues.

Together, a deeper assessment of these future research opportunities helps further develop a more comprehensive line management HR implementation model. This model should reflect wide-ranging viewpoints on the factors impacting managers' implementation decisions. Consequently, this more complete HR implementation model will help address many of the HR implementation issues described by Becker and Huselid's (2006) outline of future strategic human resources management research needs.

#### 4.3. Practical implications

Research on the issues discussed in this paper should also provide a number of key insights for HR practitioners. A better understanding of the factors impacting line manager HR implementation efforts should help HR managers more effectively design new HR practices. For example, if an organizational culture supportive of HR practices is positively related to HR implementation efforts, then HR departments looking to increase implementation activities, should examine their organization's employee management norms, values and attitudes. Similarly, if an organizational climate emphasizing HR implementation goals and rewards is positively related to implementation efforts, then HR departments aiming to boost HR practice use might focus on having specific goals and rewards encouraging line manager implementation behaviors.

Next, support for this paper's proposed model should help HR practitioners better understand the factors influencing line manager's HR implementation decisions and efforts. HR managers could use this knowledge to more effectively target their HR implementation efforts to address any critical implementation gaps. In turn, this should lead to improved employee and firm performance. An increased understanding of the factors influencing line managers' HR implementation decisions also should help HR managers better focus new HR practice development and roll-outs. For example, if HR implementation accountability is lacking, then HR managers should focus on addressing this organizational issue before launching new HR practices. Similarly, if performance incentives are lacking, then HR needs to address this concern prior to introducing additional HR programs or practices.

Finally, research into the factors proposed in this paper also should provide HR managers with better insight into line managers' HR implementation views. Better understanding of line manager HR implementation matters should help HR managers work more effectively with the line. Over time, this should help build higher quality HR/line management working relationships. This too should help improve employee and firm performance outcomes.

## 5. Conclusion

Line managers are responsible for many diverse job duties. In meeting these expectations, managers make numerous decisions about what activities they take on, and which tasks are put aside. These decisions then play a crucial role in the effective implementation of their organization's employee management practices. This paper proposed that line managers' use of their organization's HR practices is influenced by a variety of social context factors including organizational culture, climate, politics, and social interactions. In turn, higher line manager HR implementation levels were anticipated to influence critical employee outcomes such as subordinate turnover intentions, job performance, job satisfaction, and procedural justice perceptions. This

more comprehensive HR implementation model also responds to Becker and Huselid's (2006) call to further address the potential mediating role of HR implementation in the HR–firm performance relationship.

HR implementation is a key link between the development of effective HR practices and the resulting employee and firm performance outcomes. By highlighting the importance of social context factors in shaping HR implementation, this paper provides a strong base supporting additional work on this important matter. Increased understanding of these factors is key to a more comprehensive HR–firm performance model. Additionally, this insight also provides HR managers with the insight needed to improve HR's organizational impact. Together, both HR practitioners and researchers will benefit from an increased awareness of line manager HR implementation factors.

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